

Before
I Was Yours,
My Earl

HANNA HAMILTON

Before I Was Yours, My Earl

A Historical Regency Romance Novel

Edited by
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About the Author

A Thank You Gift

Thanks a lot for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me, because this is the best way to show me your love.

As a Thank You gift I have written a full length novel for you called *A True Lady*. It's only available to people who have downloaded one of my books and you can get your **free** copy by tapping [this link here](#).



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Hanna Hamilton

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“I would rather have today with you than forever with anyone else...”

Navigating an unforgiving society and still mourning her husband's untimely death, Miss Evelyn Swinton must fend for herself. To pay off the debts in her name, she is forced to accept a position as a companion to the elderly Dowager Duchess of Tolware.

There is nothing talented cook Mayson Rudge enjoys more than spending his time in the Tolware Estate kitchens. With his troubled past a memory he'd rather die than relive, he keeps his head low and his dishes impeccable. Until the day Evelyn sets foot in the manor.

Struggling to come to terms with their budding romance, Evelyn must fight the feelings of guilt that well up inside her at the thought of her deceased husband. However, their already fragile happiness shatters when Mayson nearly perishes at the hands of a distant memory. For the key to their life and their death is in the shape of a crescent moon.

Chapter 1

“*M*rs. Swinton, oh, Mrs. Swinton!” called Adelaide Sculthorpe, the Duchess of Tolware. The Duchess’ beautiful round vowels and perfectly enunciated consonants could easily be heard throughout the Dower House of Tolware Estate.

“Yes, Your Grace?” Evelyn Swinton replied. “I will be right there.”

Evelyn hurried in, carrying a stack of books and papers. Her fair skin was flushed with effort, a strand of brown hair had escaped her becoming black lace cap. A smudge of dust adorned one side of her small, well-shaped nose.

“Did you find it?” the Duchess asked.

“I did,” Evelyn replied. “It was with a stack of old school papers and copybooks. I found these books, as well. His Grace must have been very fond of travelogues.”

“Oh, he was, poor man,” the Duchess agreed. “He always became terribly ill when traveling, however. We often rode horseback because he found the swaying of a carriage unendurable. And boats... Oh, boats were right out. Poor George would be hanging over the railing heaving up his toenails before we had even left the dock.”

“Dear me,” Evelyn commented, using a napkin from the tea table to dust off a worn copy book. The legend on the front read, *George Sculthorpe, His Book*. “That must have made life terribly difficult for both of you.”

“Oh, not so much as you might think,” the Duchess replied. “We both liked staying at home and reading, so it was not so very terrible that he truly had a difficult time traveling. When little Darrius came along, we spent hours doting on him. We were both sad when we learned

that we would not be able to give him a little brother or sister.”

“I am so sorry,” Evelyn replied comfortingly. “That must have been difficult.”

“Perhaps not as difficult as actually having another child,” the Duchess winked one eye at Evelyn, roguishly. “Or raising a second one, for that matter. Darrius kept us fully occupied, sometimes from daylight till dark. He was quite the apple of his father’s eye.”

“No doubt that is how it should be,” Evelyn commented. “It is quite tragic when parents do not love their children. It is perfectly clear that you still dote on His Grace.”

“Oh, my, I suppose I do. It seems strange to hear you call Darrius ‘*His Grace*’. I always look about for his father. How I do miss him.”

“I understand,” Evelyn said, soothingly. “Even after time has passed it is difficult to be parted from a loved one.” Evelyn could not prevent a little sigh from escaping her lips.

“Oh, my dear, I did not mean to remind you,” the Duchess instantly looked contrite. “How are you holding up?”

“Well enough,” Evelyn replied. “Much better since I have been here. Everyone is so kind, you most of all.”

“Think nothing of it, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess waved one plump hand, well-bejeweled with rings. “It is only fitting that two widows should help each other. My days had become quite dreary. You make them far more interesting. Now, let me see if we have the right notebook.”

Evelyn handed the notebook to the Duchess. She opened the notebook at once, held up her lorgnette, and began scanning the pages. “Ah, yes, this is the one. We went on a walking tour through the upper meadows and on up into the hills. It was quite educational.”

“Was it, indeed?” Evelyn asked with interest.

“Oh, ever so, my dear. It was spring and we got to see the birds with their little chicks. Once we caught a glimpse of a fox, and we saw

tracks of a family of deer, although we never saw the creatures themselves.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Evelyn said.

“It was glorious,” Her Grace rhapsodized. “Of course, I would find it sadly difficult to take such a walking tour now.”

“I understand,” Evelyn replied.

The Dowager Duchess shifted her bulk in her wingback chair. “Oh, you need not mince words, Mrs. Swinton. I am old and fat, barely able to totter from bed to table and back again.”

“I would never have said so, Your Grace. Besides, I saw you dance at the last cotillion.”

“Oh, yes, you did. After all, what is life without dancing? But you also heard me groan and complain for the next three days. It is a good thing that our country life is relatively uneventful or I should be crippled up like an old spavined mare needing to be put out to pasture.”

Evelyn laughed. “Oh, never say so, Your Grace. You are young at heart, and lively when it counts. I daresay you shall live to see all the rest of us out to pasture. But you said you had something for me to look at?”

“Indeed I did. Now let me see if I can find it. Oh, here we are. My eyes are not what they once were, my dear. See if you can read it out.”

Evelyn took the copybook, seated herself on a hassock that stood near the Duchess’ chair, and obligingly began to read,

“Today we trod the grounds of Hillsworth Estate, a fine county home, well-appointed with lanes, fields, and vistas.”

“George did love to write in high style,” the Duchess remarked. “Hearing you read it out is almost like having him at my side again.” The Duchess took out a hanky and dabbed at her eyes.

“Shall I stop?” Evelyn asked. “I do not wish to make you unhappy.”

“Oh, no, dear child. We had a wonderful marriage, and many happy days together. These tears are merely water to keep my memories green and growing. I would not want for George to be forgotten.”

“Very well,” Evelyn said. “I shall read on.”

“My Duchess and I rode over in the high perch phaeton. She looked very fine in a trim habit of gray lambswool, a top hat and veil. Although the long linen duster did rather spoil the general effect, it protected her gown and jacket from the dust of our passage.”

Evelyn paused. “I thought the late Duke of Tolware did not care for travel.”

“Not as a general rule,” the Duchess said judiciously, “But he did not mind riding in an open-air conveyance. I was expecting Darrius at the time, and he did not wish to expose me to the jouncing I would have received on horseback. I rather resented the cosseting, but since Darrius proved to be our one and only child, in retrospect I can scarcely blame George for taking care of me.”

“Indeed,” Evelyn agreed equably. “Shall I read on?”

“Oh, do please,” the Duchess encouraged her.

Evelyn continued,

“The entrance is through a long lane, pleasantly lined with chestnut trees on either side. Between the trees, one can gain glimpses of the cricket field and the bowling green. Drawing up in front of the house we were met by Barnard Rutley, Earl of Hillsworth, his young son, and his stripling younger brother.”

Evelyn paused and cleared her throat.

“Tea?” Her Grace suggested.

“Yes, please,” Evelyn replied. “I swallowed quite a lot of dust while I was looking.”

“Pour for both of us, if you don’t mind,” the Duchess directed.

Evelyn obediently took the tea cozy off the pot that stood on the small table in front of the Duchess and poured a cup for each of them. She then added sugar and cream to the Duchess' tea, while taking her own tea plain.

"You do not wish to have any sugar or cream?" the Dowager Duchess asked. "You want fattening up, my dear. You are thin as a rail."

"I never learned to like it that way," Evelyn replied. "Then, when dear John was at his worst, we discovered that cream and sugar increased the phlegm in his throat. But that drinking his tea straight or with a little lemon could ease his coughing spasms and make them occur less often."

"So sad that he should pass away so young, and that you should have such a brief time together," the Duchess said. "I am glad that George and I had so many rich years."

Evelyn sighed just a little. "I could have wished for more years. But toward the end he was so miserable. I was deeply saddened when he slipped away into that final sleep, but truly, I could not have wished for him to suffer more."

"Consumption is a difficult disease," the Duchess agreed.

The two ladies were silent for a moment then Evelyn said, "Shall I read on?"

"Oh, please do," said Her Grace. "I am truly sorry for your loss, but infinitely grateful to have discovered you in your time of need. The Dreadful Creature who previously held your post kept mooning after Darrius, and I simply could not have it."

"I can assure you," Evelyn replied, "that I have no intention of mooning after anyone. John was my true love. One can hardly expect to find another in a single lifetime."

"Quite so, quite so. Now, do read on. I love sharing the pleasant memories. We had a grand time that day. Hillsworth Estate has rather fallen to ruin since Lord Barnard's time, but it was beautiful that spring. I think he must have employed more than one hundred gardeners to manage the grounds."

“Oh, my. Is it as large as that?” Evelyn looked up from the page, which was written in an elegant, flowing hand that was somewhat difficult to read.

“It is. More than one hundred acres, and most of it under cultivation in one way or another. We were privileged to see the mowers at work with their long scythes. They were followed after by a team of giggling young women who used rakes to gather up the grass clippings and put them in baskets.”

“What were they giggling about?” Evelyn asked, willing to be amused.

“Oh, silly jokes,” the Duchess smiled at the memory. “Something about the length of each gardener’s pole, and what else might grow in his garden. Or where else he might plant.”

Evelyn laughed. “Oh, dear. Such naughty lassies.”

“Village courtship, my dear. No doubt several of them were betrothed to the young men doing the mowing.”

Just then, the door to the Duchess’ solar opened to admit a handsome young man.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, with curly black hair cut in a fashionable crop, and just as fashionably tousled. He had bright blue eyes that seemed to take in everything and accept nothing at face value.

“Mother! Are you making Mrs. Swinton read that raggedy old copybook? What happened to the new novel I purchased for you?”

“We grew tired of it,” the Duchess said carelessly. “This is one of my favorite memory days. I wanted to share it with Mrs. Swinton.”

“I had hoped that by burying it in amongst my old copybooks you could be distracted from it.”

“Never, my darling son,” his mother chided him. “It was not nice of you to hide my favorite book. Naughty boy.” The Duchess shut her fan with a snap, and lightly rapped her son on the cheek with it as he bent to kiss her.

“Ow! Mama!” he protested.

“Oh, pish tosh, Darrius. I did not hurt you, and you know it. I would never hurt my dearest son.”

“I am your only son, Mother,” said the Duke.

“Which certainly makes you my dearest,” the Dowager Duchess replied, pulling his head down so that she could kiss the place she had tapped with the fan. “There now. All better?”

“Yes, of course,” Darrius said fondly. “So you would rather bore this lovely young woman with walking around moldy old Hillsworth instead of reading the exciting new novel I brought from London especially for you? I am told that all the ladies are reading it.”

“We read it already, my darling boy. Finished it up yesterday, did we not, Mrs. Swinton?”

“Indeed, we did,” Mrs. Swinton corroborated loyally. She did not disclose that less than half-way through, the Duchess had declared the book a dead bore and sent her to find an encyclopedia to read instead.

“Perhaps you could read it to me, sometime, Mrs. Swinton?” Darrius suggested with a wink.

“Perhaps. If your mother wishes to listen to it again,” Evelyn replied, carefully keeping her voice even.

Danger! Danger! her inner voice sounded the alarm. *I fear the Duke has an exclusive reading in mind, and the Duchess has already made it clear how she feels about companions who flirt with the master of the house. Besides, Her Grace has already made it equally clear how she feels about that book.*

Chapter 2

Darrius suppressed a sigh. His mother had not liked the book.

She thought she was concealing her distaste, but her face had that bland innocent look that declared that she was lying through her teeth.

Nothing he did pleased her, no matter how he tried. Since his death, the late Duke of Tolware had risen to the level of sainthood. His virtues were greatly magnified, his faults glossed over and hidden away.

Well, there was nothing for it but to make the best of a sorry situation. "I am glad that the book found some small favor," he said. "But since I have already read it, do carry on with the account of your day at Hillsworth. I recall that Father found it most memorable."

"Oh, indeed he did," his mother remarked happily. "Mrs. Swinton, be a dear and ring for another cup and a fresh pot of tea so that Darrius can join us."

Mrs. Swinton rose, went to the embroidered bellpull which had been placed conveniently within his mother's reach, and tugged on it.

Darius noted that she looked trim in her widow's black, and seemed to have a pleasing figure. Her day gown was supremely modest, with a high neck that gave the impression of her well-shaped head being mounted on a pedestal.

Within moments a maid, dressed in a dark wool uniform, crisp apron, and white cap, appeared at the doorway. "Yes, Your Grace?" she said, as she curtsied.

"A fresh pot of tea, and another cup," the Duchess ordered, "Oh, and see if the cook has any of those small bubbly pies. Be sure to tell him

to send up enough for my son, as well as Mrs. Swinton and me.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.” The maid curtsied again, and disappeared down the hall.

“Now, where were we?” his mother queried of her companion. “Oh, yes, just as we were pulling up to the door of Hillsworth. Do continue, my dear.”

Mrs. Swinton took up the journal and continued reading. She had a surprisingly well-modulated voice, pleasant and clear. She made the scene at Hillsworth come alive as she read the description of rolling hills, small streams, unexpected fountains, and little grottos. Darrius could almost imagine having been there, even though upon that day he had been securely cradled inside his mother’s body, and the current condition of the estate was far from ideal.

Father always wanted Hillsworth. I wonder if Mother ever realized that his tender description of the estate next door was the covetous voice of envy? No, I rather doubt that she ever did. To his credit, Father never alluded to it when visiting with his neighbors. I wonder what will become of it now that the rightful heir has disappeared and his uncle has taken over? Well, that is certainly not my problem. I have quite enough to manage right here.

Darrius returned his attention to his mother and her companion. “—then we came back, and had the most wonderful tea. I had been craving fresh fruit, even though it was not in season yet. Those strawberries out of the hothouse were absolutely the best I have ever eaten, before or since.”

“We have our own hothouse now, Mother,” Darrius put in. “Father took great pride in it. I believe the strawberries are in full flower now, the first ripe berries picked, and it will not be long before we shall be able to have all the strawberries and cream we wish to eat without sending out for them.”

“Truly?” The Dowager turned her gaze upon her son, and smiled at him fondly. “You will remember to have some sent here?”

“Of course I will,” Darrius promised. “How could I not when you love them so? But I will own that with the new wing, while it is somewhat crass to say so, sales of our surplus will do well toward shoring up supplies for spring planting.”

“That is splendid,” Her Grace exclaimed, a half beat late. Darrius could see that her eyes were glazing over with the early warning signs of boredom. Father had always been the one to take interest in the estate’s accounts. He had been wont to remark that while many gentlemen eschewed dirtying their hands with details of the estate, there was satisfaction in seeing a place well run and producing a profit.

The companion, apparently sensing a familial breach of accord, leaped into the widening silence. “Indeed it is, Your Grace. Does the estate derive a great deal of its income from sales of produce from the hothouses?” Clearly Mrs. Swinton, having been raised in a shop-keeping family, felt no compunction about discussing finances.

“Not an extensive amount,” Darrius replied, pleased to have the discussion turned toward his interests. “We make far more from rents and from the sale of lamb’s wool. But it adds a little to our coffers. More importantly, the hothouses add a great deal to the variety of foods available to our tables.”

“Lamb’s wool,” Mrs. Swinton mused. “I used to knit. I wonder if I might be able to purchase some from your herdsman for my own amusement?”

“Why, we shall do better than that,” Darrius beamed at her. “I will have him send down a fleece. I believe that they have just been washed and are being made ready for market.”

“You are very kind,” Mrs. Swinton replied, dropping her eyes modestly. “But it might take me some time to work up that much.”

“Think nothing of it,” Darrius waved his left hand as if brushing away flies. “Consider it a bonus for your excellent work here. Some of the maids can help you with the carding or whatever. You make Mother happy, so I am glad to assist with your amusement. Just do not let it become so much of a burden that you neglect your duties.”

“I would not dream of it,” Mrs. Swinton’s face came up, her eyes widening in shock. “That would be extremely unkind of me, especially since it is through your good offices that the wool would be made available to me.”

The Duchess intervened. “Have no fear, Darrius. I am far more likely

to have to encourage her to take her half day off. I have never had such a person in my service. She is always writing letters, reading to me, or making small things to add to my comfort or to entertain me. It has surely been our good fortune to have such an industrious angel come to be with me."

"I am glad to hear it," Darrius said. "She did come highly recommended, and by the physician who attended her husband, no less."

"And why should he not?" his mother said with some vigor. "It is not every wife who will stay by the side of a consumptive right until the end. Although I do hope that Mrs. Swinton's duties here are much lighter since I am not an invalid."

Mrs. Swinton blushed and dropped her eyes, clearly embarrassed to be the topic of conversation.

"There now, you need not color up, my dear," the Duchess said. "You know that it is no more than the truth and I would speak it behind your back as readily as before your face. I do wish we had some of those berries here today. All this talk has made me quite hungry."

"I had some sent down to the kitchens just this morning, along with several other fine edibles," Darrius soothed. "No doubt the cook will have something made up to go with your dinner."

"That is my good son," the Duchess smiled with delight. "Come here and let me give you a hug."

"A fitting end to my visit," the Duke returned, rising from his seat.

He went over, leaned down, and kissed his mother on the cheek.

She patted his cheek gently, then wiped at an imaginary smudge on her son's face. "You are my very dearest boy. Must you go so soon?"

"If I am to return here for dinner, I must," he replied. "Perhaps I should stay over, and have breakfast with you as well." His words were addressed to his mother, but his eyes were upon the companion.

"That would be lovely," the Duchess said fondly. "Your intended will

be paying a visit next week. Do you think the strawberries will hold until then?"

"I think they will be at their finest," Darrius replied. "I shall quite look forward to seeing Blanche."

"Then I will alert the cook. He does the finest things with the simplest ingredients. I can hardly wait to see what he might do with strawberries."

"Do not plan anything overly grand," Darrius cautioned his mother. "Remember, Blanche has a delicate appetite." Blanche was slender to the point of emaciation, narrow-hipped and small-breasted, and possessed of a nervous disposition. Although they had known each other since childhood, and had always been aware that they were destined to wed, Darrius found that she was not always the easiest person to please.

"Oh, but no doubt her parents will visit also. Lord Carletane will more than make up for Blanche's bird-like picking. Her mother also has an appreciation of excellent food."

Darrius plastered a smile upon his face and replied, "Why, so they do, and, yes, they are likely to visit with her."

How my father ever became friends with Carletane I shall never know. He is an abominable toadeater, and has the most encroaching ways. One good thing about this marriage is that I believe Blanche will be grateful to get away from her parents, and therefore perhaps be compliant to my desires.

Darrius said fondly to his parent, "I shall see you at dinner. Will you be there also, Mrs. Swinton?"

"Of course, where else should she be? Well, if you must toddle off, then so be it. I shall look forward to dinner," his mother replied.

As the door closed behind him, Darrius heard his mother say to her companion, "Isn't he the dearest boy? Surely you can see why George and I doted on him so much."

Chapter 3

Mayson Rudge carefully slid the pies out of the oven using

the long wooden paddle, and the leather fingerless gloves he always wore to protect his palms from the heat. They were a clever way to let him grab a hot kettle or pan by the handle without searching for an oven mitt or potholder, two things that always seemed to be elsewhere when needed in this particular kitchen.

Mr. Sparks, the undercook, was supposed to keep the incidental items in good order, as well as assist with the routine cooking, but he was getting on in years. Mayson often found it expedient to simply take care of Mr. Sparks' duties as well as his own.

Two of the maids were nattering away in the hallway while they were carrying the dishes from the kitchen to the main dining hall and a few items to the servants' dining hall. The servants' meal would be served after the master, mistress, the companion, and guests had dined. This would be something of a feast, so there would be plenty of leftovers. But even when the meals were more modest, the Duchess always remembered that she was feeding more than the people at the head table, and had given him permission early on to plan proper meals for the help. Her son was generous, giving her an allowance over and above her established dowry so the household was never in want.

Good thing, too, for even as small an establishment as the Dower House required laundry maids, upstairs maids to take care of the bedrooms, downstairs maids to dust the library and the several sitting rooms, as well as kitchen maids, scullery, gardeners, and more. Mayson blessed all the hours he had spent with a certain dear old cook, who had been more than happy to teach a bored, lonely little boy the craft of cooking.

The pies bubbled appealingly, and gave off a delectable aroma. They were part of the bumper crop of strawberries from the Main House.

With a judicious amount of rhubarb added, they were a feast fit for kings, he thought.

Mayson was listening with half an ear to the maids' chatter. He had learned more than one thing happening around the neighborhood simply by opening an ear to their seemingly banal chatter.

"—and they never found the body?" Betty, a young kitchen maid who had been a member of the staff scarcely more than a week, seemed astonished by whatever it was the maids were talking over.

"Never," said Molly Sue, the older maid. Then she added in the tones usually reserved for telling ghost stories, "But they say that when the moon is full his ghost walks the grounds, and if you look just right, when the moon is only a crescent, you can see his hand held up in silhouette against it. And," she added in a sepulcher voice, "you can see the birthmark in the shape of a crescent moon on his wrist."

"Ah, go on," Betty said skeptically. "You're just tryin' to scare the new girl."

"No, really," Molly Sue insisted. "Well, maybe not the ghost part. But the part about the birthmark an' his body never found. Some folks think the uncle did away with 'im, but nothin' was ever proved."

"Surely not his own kin, that way," Betty protested. "I can't imagine..."

The two maids disappeared down the hall, their voices trailing after them. Mayson sighed. One of these days he would have to speak to them about gossiping about their betters, but not today. The young master was in the house and the dinner needed to be perfect.

There was a light patter of slippered feet, and the new companion appeared in the doorway. "The Duchess would like to know... Oh, good. You made bubbly pies."

"Indeed I did," Mayson replied. "Strawberry-rhubarb because we all know that they are the young Duke's favorite. I also made a tremendous roast, from which I caught the drippings to make a clear broth for the first course. There are three kinds of vegetables, including the boiled greens the Duchess' physician recommended that she have with her dinner. There is a vinegar side topping which

should make them more palatable for her.”

“Oh, thank you,” the companion replied. “She eats them, but not without complaint.”

“I quite understand,” Mayson replied. “I’m Mayson Rudge,” he added. “I didn’t quite catch your name, although I know that you are the new companion.”

“Mrs. Evelyn Swinton,” she replied. “Pleased to make your acquaintance.” She did not curtsy as one of the kitchen maids might have done, but dipped her head in acknowledgement. “I have heard a great deal about you, but have not had opportunity to come to the kitchen before now.”

A taking little thing, Mayson thought. She had soft brown hair that was covered discretely with a little widow’s cap made from black lace and ribbons.

She was dressed in black, a trim bombazine that fit her curvaceous form neatly. The fabric was not of the best, but the workmanship that put it together was meticulous. A close-fitting tall collar around her throat allowed a modest frill of black lace to cushion a delicate chin.

Above the chin curved a sweet mouth that seemed made for smiling, a well-shaped small nose, and bright, lively eyes the green of new leaves framed with long, curling eyelashes beneath perfectly arched dark brows. The black frill accentuated her rosy cheeks and clear complexion. Her color began to rise under his scrutiny, and Mayson realized that he was staring.

“I, uh, am also happy to make your acquaintance,” Mayson did not stammer, but felt far less than his usual assurance. “Would Her Grace like an advance tidbit?”

The lovely lips curled into the promised smile at that inquiry. “She would. How did you ever guess?”

“Because her son tends to eat whole pies at a setting, so I always make a small one just for her.” Mayson turned to a small cupboard and pulled out a smaller pie, one that was already cooling. He placed it in a little basket along with a small wedge of cheese and a bottle of cold tea. “Her Grace’s favorite tea. She will dine with the Duke at the usual

hour?"

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Swinton replied. "And I must hurry now so that I can dress for dinner. His intended and her parents will also be in attendance."

As she hastened away, Mayson wondered what "*dressing for dinner*" constituted for this companion. She was the fourth or fifth in succession since Mayson had been the cook. That would make it, oh, about one new companion every six months. The previous companion had always dressed to the nines when the Duke was dining with his mother. The Dowager Duchess had certainly noticed it, and had turned her off with only the most minimal references because of it.

Mayson returned to his cooking, stirring the glazed carrots, taking up the despised greens, and making sure that there was a cruet of spiced apple wine vinegar to go on the latter dish. With practiced skill, he turned out a seven-course meal that would not overwhelm six diners, yet would still leave them satisfied, but his mind was not on his task.

Rather, he kept remembering how Mrs. Swinton's perfectly shaped lips had curled into a smile, and how her eyes had crinkled at the corners. How had the Duchess persuaded such a gem to act as her companion? If her garments were any indication, Mrs. Swinton was a widow. From her age, and the lack of wear on her widow's weeds, a fairly recent one at that.

As he watched the last dish go out of the kitchen in the hands of the chattering maids, he wondered if she would come to the kitchen often. She did not look like the midnight snacking sort of person, but the Duchess often liked a little something after hours and would send her companion to select a tidbit or two.

Mayson had quickly learned to keep small refreshments on hand for the Duchess' midnight appetite. After a consultation with her physician, he had been leaning more toward fruit compotes or blancmange, rather than the heavier desserts the Duchess truly favored. So far, either Her Grace had not caught on, or she was allowing him to steer her midnight snack selections.

Mayson sighed, remembering the times when he had gone to the kitchen and made dishes to tempt his father in his last days. But the Grim Reaper would visit any household, and mere skill with a spoon

could not defeat him.

Tonight's snack for the Dowager was a simple fruit pudding with a light syrup, and a topping of fresh, sliced strawberries from the estate's hot house. Easy to digest, and unlikely to upset an aging tummy, while still delighting the taste buds of a food connoisseur. With it tucked neatly into a special cupboard, Mayson turned his attention toward cleaning up, setting the bread sponge for morning, and generally ending the day in the kitchen.

The potboy cheerfully helped him with wrestling the large, copper-bottomed pots to the washing drain, an innovation installed by the late Duke of Tolware. The maids came back to take the remains of the dishes that had already been served up to the servants' dining hall for their dinner. Everything was normal. Everything was as it should be. But something kept pulling at him.

Was it a pair of sparkling green eyes? Was it the quiet dignity that the new companion wore about her like a mantle? Was it some niggling unease caused by the kitchen maids nattering about murder?

More likely, a touch of indigestion from too much tasting, Mayson thought to himself.

Just then the butler entered. "Mr. Rudge," he said ponderously, "The Duchess would like for you to come up to receive thanks for your dinner preparations."

Hastily, Mayson whipped off the stained, spattered apron that showed too clearly the effects of the evening's labors. Just as quickly, he put on a clean one. He then doffed the sweat-stained skull cap that kept his hair out of the food, and the food out of his hair, replacing it with a pristinely starched chef's hat that was kept for just this purpose.

Looking the absolute best that a professional cook at the end of a long, hot meal preparation can possibly look, he went up to receive formal accolades and thanks.

As he stood in the dining room door, in his proper place for such events, he noted that Mrs. Swinton wore a slightly dressier version of the gown she had worn earlier. This one displayed her fair shoulders, as was proper for dining in company, but still covered her bosom more than adequately and was modestly understated.

With effort, he wrenched his attention away from her, and gave the Duchess a proper bow, murmuring his thanks for the appreciation.

Back downstairs, he took his seat at the servants' table, about midway down the side of it. He ranked somewhat below the butler and housekeeper, but higher than the other kitchen workers. The head stableman sat across from him, shoulder to shoulder with the head gardener.

The meal was eaten in reverent silence, except for the occasional, *"Please pass..."* and the clatter of cutlery against china. When the dessert was finished, the butler rose and said, "Excellent as always, Mr. Rudge. You are a treasure."

"Thank you, Mr. Wilson," Mayson replied. "It is my pleasure to be of service."

The night staff began clearing the table. As he passed Mayson while clearing the table, the potboy nudged him and said, "She's a looker, ain't she?"

Mayson frowned at him.

"Miz Swinton," the young man said. "She's quite a looker."

Mayson stared at him for just long enough to make the youngster squirm. "Mrs. Swinton is an attractive lady, and far above your station. Do not forget yourself, Jemmy."

The young man flushed. "I din' mean nothin' by it, Mr. Rudge. But she's, as you say, attractive. An' more'n that, she's nice."

Mayson let his attitude soften. "Yes, she is. And therefore all the more deserving of respect, don't you think?"

"Yessir, Mr. Rudge. I'll remember."

Mayson gazed thoughtfully after the lad as he staggered off toward the kitchen under his load of dishes.

He said no more than what you were thinking. She is lovely, and she is nice. But you are only a cook, and she is a companion. She is above your

station, too.

Mayson sighed. Sometimes it was difficult to make it through a day in good order. He began to scrape and stack dishes, doing his part of the clearing up. Was this how his life was to be now? Always the same?

Chapter 4

Darrius sat at the head of the dinner table, with his intended on his left and his mother on his right. Mrs. Swinton sat between Blanche Notley and her mother, Lady Carletane, while Lord Carletane, Miss Notley's father, sat across the table from them.

The table is sadly out of balance, he thought sourly. I should have invited some other guests, but this is my mother's house, not mine.

"Oh, my very dear," the Duchess gushed to Blanche, "I am so glad you could visit with us today. Darrius had the gardener bring the most delicious treat from the estate's very own hothouse."

"That is simply amazing," Blanche replied. Her voice was thin, high, and slightly nasal. "I have not been able to visit a hothouse since I was a child. It was found that the vapors from the plants clog up my nose and make my eyes run as copiously as if I had lost my last friend."

"Dear me," the Duchess seemed slightly taken aback by this information, as if she had not heard it every time she was in raptures over a berry or blossom. "That is simply dreadful, Blanche. I am so sorry for your plight. I simply cannot imagine not being able to stop and smell the roses."

Blanche took this statement in good part. "I am afraid that if I tried, I would be smelling nothing at all for weeks to come. Just think how tragic that would be, not to be able to appreciate the aroma of a good, beef broth or the essence of a kidney pie."

The Dowager Duchess lifted one eyebrow slightly, and gave a delicate little shudder. "You could have gone all evening without mentioning kidney pie. Dear George doted on them, but I simply cannot abide the flavor of organ meats. We had a cook who most delicately would make up a small fish pie for me on the nights when he made kidney

pie for everyone else.”

“That was extremely kind of him,” Blanche remarked, diplomatically endorsing the cook from the past and his endeavors. She was just as aware of the Duchess’ aversion to kidney pie as the Duchess was of Blanche’s inability to appreciate the scent of most things that bloomed or leafed.

Darrius knew that if his mother and his intended were not interrupted, they would go on like this for hours. It was a game between them, one with almost all the moves mapped out, much like the maneuvering of two experienced chess players who are so well matched that neither loses a man to the other, allowing them to play for weeks, if not months, at the same game.

With the idea of breaking up this verbal competition, Darrius turned to Lord Carletane and asked, “Have you been hunting recently?”

“Nothing to signify,” his future father-in-law replied. “Bagged a few pheasants a week ago, Sunday. Good sport, though. Took out a young hound that I’m just now training.”

“Excellent,” Darrius commented. “Did he do well?”

“Well enough. At least he stuck to business, and didn’t go off hunting bunnies.”

“That’s impressive for a young dog on his first outing,” Darrius said admiringly.

Lord Carletane nodded, pleased by the approbation. “Isn’t it just? My kennel master knows his trade well. Turns out pups trained to a treat. What about yourself? Seen any sport lately?”

“A little fishing,” Darrius replied, fully aware that his bride-to-be had an aversion to all outdoor sports. But dash it all, he did not want to sit through an evening of the ladies’ verbal sparring. “They were biting well after that last rain. Our cook has an excellent eye as to what parts to save for bait, and had some choice bits ready for me. This last round, I was using pieces of bacon that had gone a bit off.”

Lady Carletane apparently decided that the hunting and sporting talk had gone on long enough. “Your Grace,” she addressed the Duchess,

"Is that a new cap? It is quite fetching."

"Oh, indeed it is!" the Duchess replied, pleased as Punch that someone noticed. "My companion, Mrs. Swinton, made it. She is an excellent hand with a needle."

"Is that indeed so?" Blanche raised her lorgnette, and peered through it at Evelyn. "Are married ladies usually companions?"

"Widowed," Mrs. Swinton replied, equably. "Married ladies would be much too busy with home and hearth. As it is, I find that it is my pleasure to create such small things for Her Grace."

"Oh." Blanche let her lorgnette fall to her lap. "I am sorry, I had no idea."

"It is quite all right," Mrs. Swinton replied. "How could you have known?"

"Perhaps you can become a milliner," Lady Carletane sniffed, "Since it is clear you have few conversational skills."

"Now that is unkind," the Duchess said severely. "What sort of conversational skills should she have, Lavinia? I declare, marrying a Viscount has given you no more social graces than when we were girls in finishing school."

Oh, no. Must head this off before it turns into a major row.

"I say," Darrius put in, "It is a fetching cap. I believe that Mrs. Swinton is quite skilled in several needle and craft arts. She recently requested some lamb's wool for knitting. She has kept my mother happy and entertained for the better part of two months, for which we are all grateful."

The Duchess closed her fan with a snap, and gently rapped Darrius on the knuckles of his right hand. "Ungrateful boy! If I were not so pleased with Mrs. Swinton, I declare I should take umbrage. As it is, I will tell you, Lavinia, that she reads beautifully and is happy to discuss almost any topic. You must understand that Mr. Swinton was taken from her by consumption not quite a year ago. You cannot expect her to be equable about discussing it."

“So recently as that?” Lord Carletane asked. “I’m sure many ladies would be prostrate with such a stressful event in the near past.”

Mrs. Swinton, who by now had two spots of high color on her cheeks, said quietly, “Consumption is a long and expensive illness, Lord Carletane. I am afraid I did not have the luxury of taking time to be prostrate.”

Lord Carletane chuckled. “You know, I quite like her, Lavinia. She is pert and she has backbone. Reminds me of Adelaide when she and George were first married.”

“Well, I never!” Lady Carletane sniffed. “I’m tempted to send for the carriage so that Blanche and I can simply go home.”

“There, there, my dear,” Lord Carletane soothed. “You know you are my favorite lady of all time. But you have to admit, that we have quite put Mrs. Swinton on the spot, and here we are talking about her as if she were a statue in our midst.” He turned to Mrs. Swinton and said, “I quite apologize. We are behaving abominably.”

“Not at all,” Mrs. Swinton said. “It is natural for people to be curious, and you can scarcely learn about anything if you do not ask questions. I will own, I do find it difficult to talk about Mr. Swinton. I do miss him a great deal, even though we were only married for two years.”

Blanche’s face softened. “I do apologize. I’m sure it must have been a difficult experience for you.”

Mrs. Swinton sighed. “Apology accepted. Think nothing of it.”

“Perhaps we could speak of a less delicate topic,” Darrius said. “What was your opinion of Waverly, Mrs. Swinton?”

“I found it to be well-named,” she returned promptly. “The protagonist was always ‘wavering’ about something.”

“Quite so, quite so,” Lord Carletane chortled. “I’m surprised you made it all the way through it.”

“We finished it a day or two ago, then turned out attention to some local histories, did we not, Your Grace?” Mrs. Swinton deftly turned

the attention back to their hostess.

“Why, yes, we did,” the Duchess agreed. “Which did you prefer, Mrs. Swinton, the description of Hillsworth or the walking tour on the moors?”

“I found both fascinating,” Mrs. Swinton replied. “But I think the moors were my favorite. Which did you prefer, Your Grace?”

“Oh, I have always loved the account of our day at Hillsworth. George was so handsome that day. It seems a hard thing that the place is falling to ruin now, under the care of that uncle to the heir. What was the lad’s name? I declare I cannot remember.”

“No idea,” Darrius replied. “Nor do I think the property is in as sad a state as all that. No doubt it shall come about once the inheritance is straightened out. It is difficult to steward a place with an absentee landlord who might or might not return one day.”

“Just what is the story about that?” Mrs. Swinton asked.

“A most curious thing,” Lord Carletane said. “The heir went fishing one day, and then disappeared. They found his fishing hat and his pole beside the riverbank, but no sign at all of him. Some folks believe that his uncle did him in, but I, for one, would never think such a thing of Leroy Rutley, as fine a sporting man as ever rode to the hounds.”

The Duchess clicked her tongue against her teeth, and nodded to the butler to have the soup course cleared away, and the main course brought in. She made a face at the small dish of boiled greens that appeared next to her plate but brightened when she saw the cruet of vinegar beside it. “My cook is such a dear boy. He never forgets to make the physician’s recommendations palatable.”

“We are all grateful to the physician, as well,” Darrius said to his parent fondly. “I declare you have never looked better, Mother.”

“I would take umbrage at that, my son, except that I truly do feel better. Of late, I have not felt so bilious at bedtime, and have even had energy enough to walk to the end of the garden. It is quite a change from languishing in my rooms. Of course, it does not hurt at all that the buds on the trees are swelling, and the snowdrops blooming.”

“Achoo,” Blanche sneezed daintily into a lace handkerchief. “I feel my nose closing down, just thinking about such a journey.”

And here we go again. Between Mother, the future in-laws, and Blanche, I feel completely beleaguered. Yet, I need this marriage and the endowment, to say nothing of joining our estates together. At this dinner, the one sane, sensible conversationalist has been Mrs. Swinton.

Chapter 5

Mayson smiled at the soft patter of slippers feet. Mrs.

Swinton was coming downstairs to get the Duchess' special treat. He had observed that the companion was not as fond of sweets as Her Grace, and had added an assortment of crackers and sliced cheese to the evening snack.

For the Duchess, he had a pear compote that was lightly sprinkled with sugar, then liberally dusted with cinnamon and just the tiniest pinch of nutmeg. Mrs. Swinton laughed when she smelled the nutmeg in the mix.

"What is it?" Mayson asked, feeling a little worried.

"I had a little nut tree," she recited mischievously.

"Oh, the one with the silver nutmeg and the golden pear?" Mayson gave a little chuckle of his own.

"The very one," Mrs. Swinton agreed. "I wonder if Her Grace will think of it?"

"How did you know there was nutmeg?" Mayson inquired.

"The smell. Cinnamon has a similar odor, but nutmeg gives it just that little bit more of an edge."

"That it does," Mayson nodded. "Like a tiny bit of pepper on a dish of dumplings. Not enough to upset the senses, but rather to tease them into enjoyment."

"That is amazingly poetic," Mrs. Swinton said in astonishment.

Mayson felt a glow of pleasure at her praise. "Thank you," he said. "It warms my heart that you think so."

"Oh, you!" Mrs. Swinton said, "You are teasing me."

"No, not at all," Mayson replied. "Not very many people appreciate my small homilies. But I find that cooking is a great deal like life."

"Oh?" Mrs. Swinton paused, the tray in her hands.

"Yes, indeed. In cooking, you frequently get back the effort you put into it. Dash things together indifferently, and you get back a slapdash sort of meal. But if you measure, calculate, and plan, you frequently create something good. Moreover, if you have written down what you did, you can duplicate the dish on another day. Life works like that—you get back mostly what you put into it."

"But what about when your efforts multiply?" Mrs. Swinton asked. "Sometimes the smallest deed can bring amazing results."

"That," Mayson said, flashing an appreciative grin, "is what happens when you accidentally happen upon exceptional ingredients and the results are far greater than you would have anticipated with more ordinary fruits."

Mrs. Swinton smiled back at him. "Do you know," she endorsed his comment, "I do believe that you are right."

With that, she turned around and headed up the stairs, leaving Mayson gaping after her.

Had she been flirting? Best not to push your luck. But some people are like the best fruit or the finest wine.

He whistled happily as he kneaded the bread, and set the loaves ready for baking in the morning.

Some people do not need to do anything to make a room brighter, a day better, or the general prospect of living more attractive.

Mrs. Swinton was like that. Any time she came down to the kitchen, his day was a little bit brighter, and his work a little lighter. Tonight,

he almost felt as if she might return the feeling. But it was far too soon to hope. After all, she was still in half-mourning for her husband. By all accounts, the fellow had been a fine man who had worked as hard as he could until his illness became too much for him.

What privations she must have suffered, with neither of them earning any money, the doctor to pay, and medicines to buy.

Yet, here she was cossetting an exacting elderly Duchess, and going about her work as cheerful as any might be.

Just thinking about her made him smile. "Wake, wake you drowsy sleeper," he sang softly as he scrubbed down the wooden table where he kneaded the bread and cut the vegetables, making it ready for preparing food on the morrow. Did he dare to try to wake his little sleeper, wake her from the wall of dutiful cheerfulness she had built around herself?

"Unkind," he chided himself. "She has bought herself a little peace. Who am I to take that from her?"

He took out his notebook, made of sheets of foolscap stitched together, and began to make notes about the day's meals. Before long, his pencil slowed, and he stared into space. A smile curved around his lips. It was not strawberries or clotted cream that filled his musings. Rather, it was the way Mrs. Swinton's soft brown hair escaped her widow's cap, and curled about the lace edgings.

It was thus Jemmy, the potboy, found him when he came in to take over the late night kitchen chores. "I say, Mr. Rudge," he said respectfully. "Perhaps you should toddle off to bed. It'll be cock's crow before you know it. Mr. Sparks has been abed this last hour or more."

"No doubt you are right, Jemmy," Mayson said. "I've set the bread to rise. Have a care with it when you fire up the ovens in the morning. Remember, it needs a slow heat to be at its best."

"I remember," Jemmy said. "I'll be careful of it, Mr. Rudge. 'Specially if I can have a crust when it comes out. You does bread to a fine turn, you does."

"I think there will be enough for you to have a bit in the morning," Mayson smiled at the boy. At seven-and-ten years, Jemmy was a lanky

youth. Like many such youngsters, he seemed to be hollow inside. It seemed no matter how much he ate, he was still hungry. "More than that, I think there might be a little something to go on it. But mind the heat for the oven, else there will not be any for anyone."

"Have no fear, Mr. Rudge," Jemmy said respectfully. "I'll be very careful, an' not just so's I can have a crust."

"I know you will," Mayson said, clapping the boy lightly on the shoulder. "I will be up to help with breakfast."

With that, Mayson went off to his small room behind the pantry. But when he was stretched out on his cot, he found it hard to make himself comfortable. As he lay there, half dreaming, he imagined dancing with Mrs. Swinton. She would be feather-light in his arms, of that he was sure. Her green eyes would sparkle, then she would say something like, "*Mayson Rudge...*" But before he could imagine what she would say, true sleep claimed him. Yet, the pretty companion danced with him in his dreams, even if she would be unlikely to do so in life.

Chapter 6

Leroy Rutley surveyed the lawn with a sour expression. He was tempted to plow the plagued thing up and plant it in oats. At least he could then realize a return on it. Instead, he now had ten stalwart farmhands moving across it confidently, employing their scythes. Once this was done, there would be the cricket field, followed by the bowling green. As an economical measure, he had done away with the custom of having the men, followed by maids, to rake up the grass, certainly an unnecessary extravagance. Whatever had his uncle been thinking?

“Move it along there,” he bawled, as one of the youngsters slacked his steady back and forth movement.

“There is a snake, Mr. Rutley,” the young fellow called back. “That science fellow is offering tuppence for each one caught, and a shillin’ iffen its rare.”

Leroy perked up. The young man was speaking his language. “Keep an eye on it. Somebody, run for a sack and fireplace tongs.”

One of the house servants hastened forward. “Right here, Mr. Rutley. Brought ‘em down on purpose ‘cause tha mowin’ always brings ‘em out.”

Leroy took the sack and the tongs, then advanced to where the brave young mower was keeping the snake’s attention with flourishes of the blunt side of his scythe. Leroy nipped in, grasped the snake with the tongs, and held it in the air. It immediately created a foul odor that had most of the company backing up hastily to get away from the stench.

“Faugh!” Leroy grunted in disgust, dropping the wriggling creature into a bag. “Common grass snake. Still, tuppence is tuppence, and you

shall have your share, young man.”

Leroy fished in his waistcoat pocket where he always kept a few coins and fished out a haypence. “For your vigilance,” he said.

The young man looked slightly disappointed. Probably he had hoped for the whole tuppence for himself. But coins were scarce and even a haypence was to be hoarded. No doubt the youth was courting one of his village neighbor’s daughters. This little coin would be added to the fellow’s growing hoard.

“Look sharp,” Leroy called out to the mowers. “Where there was one, there are likely to be more.”

Encouraged by the immediate reward, the mowers returned to their labors with renewed vigor.

Leroy mused sourly on the circumstances that forced him into competition with the hired hands and staff for bounties on snakes. He had been genuinely fond of his older brother, Barnard Rutley, but simply could not abide that sniveling little brat of a nephew.

Leroy had tried his hardest to be rid of the boy after Barnard’s passing, making little or no secret of his personal dislike of the youth. He first sent him to an especially tough military boarding school, but that merely led the unlikely little fiend to enlist when Napoleon made his moves.

There had been some hope with that enlistment. Military officers in France were notorious for becoming cannon fodder. But against all odds, young Rutley had come home without so much as a scar to show for his adventures.

There had been some hope when the boy evinced a liking for mushrooms.

Tricksy things mushrooms, one wrong one in a pot, and off you go without so much as a by-your-leave. But apparently his stay in France made him conversant in all the types of mushroom and their flavors.

Leroy was truly astonished the day that the staff had come to him, wringing their hands, and saying that the young Earl’s hat had been found beside a brook that in the spring freshets had turned into a

raging river. A hat, a creel of rancid bacon, and a broken fishing pole were all that remained of the boy.

Such a tragedy!

Unfortunately, with no body at hand, the disappearance of the Earl of Hillsworth did little for Leroy. The courts required a *corpus delicti* or other proof of death; or Leroy would have to wait long enough for his nephew to be declared legally dead.

Yet, in the absence of its rightful lord, Hillsworth still required maintenance and oversight. Moreover, it required it with no more funding than the day-to-day produce of farm and field. Barnard had been remarkably improvident, focusing on marble statuary, strolling lawns, cricket fields, and bowling greens.

Why could he have not been more interested in raising sheep, like our countrified neighbor?

Tolware certainly seemed to be thriving.

Three more snakes were frightened out of their hiding. Two of them were grass snakes, but the third was an adder. The science fellow seemed particularly interested in adders. While one did wonder why, a shilling for a viper was not to be sneezed at, so long as one did not get bitten by the creature.

With the mowing done, and the snakes collected in a covered pail—thoughtfully fetched by another servant—Leroy felt a little more cheerful. After paying the day laborers and giving the bonuses for the snakes, he scarcely broke even. But to show his own disappointment would be to brand him as common management, rather than as a sporting gentleman who enjoyed the excitement of snake catching.

I am common management. The principle is all tied up and beyond my reach until such time as it is proven beyond doubt that young Lord Hillsworth is dead. Such a bother. But it would never do for the villagers or the help to realize that such is my status.

That evening, Leroy pondered his plight as he dug into a simple meal of boiled beef and neeps. He'd never been overly fond of neeps, but they took on the flavor of the beef. With a dash of India spice, it was edible. The flavors grew more tolerable as he washed his repast down

with several cups of small beer.

Just as he gave a mighty eructation brought on by the gaseous nature of his meal, inspiration came to him.

How had the mower found the fellow who wanted to buy snakes? He had found him listed on a broadside tacked up in the village square.

The very thing! He would have several broadsides with a description of his nephew posted around the country, along with a reward for finding him. It was completely in character with a right-minded uncle, frantic with grief and despairing of finding his nephew.

Yes, this would work. It would work very nicely, because if there was anything he had learned by being the steward of Hillsworth, it was that coins were extremely persuasive. Now, just how much could he put up as a reward? For sure as betting apples to cheese, the claimant would expect to get paid. Since that could very well involve some of the shadier members of society, Leroy had no desire to fall afoul of them by welshing on the reward.

These pleasant thoughts accompanied him all the way to the old study beside the library, where he had his brandy. Thus fortified, he chuckled softly to himself as he submitted his person to his valet, before retiring for the night.

Lying awake on his pillow, instead of thrashing around in frustration as had been his wont of late, he stared up into the darkness, imagining what it would be like to truly be in charge of Hillsworth Estate.

The first thing I would do is get rid of all those silly statues. Then I would plant oats on the lawn. But I would keep the cricket field and the bowling green. I do rather like a good game of bowls. Horses. I would start a fine stable, horses love oats. And I would...

Moonlight slanted across the floor in Leroy's room, casting a soft glow over everything. As it did so, a very odd silhouette cast a shadow from the window.

Leroy's eyes widened as what appeared to be the shadow of a hand moved across the window. The shape of a crescent moon shown through the wrist of it.

Leroy let out a shriek, and bolted from his bed. He grabbed an old sword from the mantle where it hung as a decoration, and charged toward the window. He heard a sort of breathy shriek, then someone said, "Owe!"

Someone else giggled, and a childish voice said, "Shush! He'll hear you!"

Leroy flung open the window just in time to see two youthful figures leap down from the veranda railing, and go pelting across the newly mown bowling green in the moonlight.

"I'll turn you off without references!" Leroy shouted.

"Don't work for you," a boy's voice shouted back. "An' our mum and da don't neither. You canned 'em last week, you old sourpuss. Serves you right to get nuffin' but bully beef and neeps for dinner."

"W'at he said," another voice called. "Hope a snake bites you."

Then the two running figures disappeared into the wood, leaving Leroy standing on the veranda, holding a rusty sword in his hand.

Leroy stumped back into his bedroom, and used the mantle striker to light the candle standing next to it. Taking up the decanter, also on the mantelpiece, he poured two fingers of brandy into the glass he had used just before going to bed.

He gagged down the fiery liquid, then stared at the glass in his hand.

Why had the servants not cleared it away?

He had finished with it. It should have vanished.

Uneasy, he splashed some more brandy into the glass, and sat down in the wingback chair that sat before the cold fireplace.

Something is very wrong here. Very, very wrong.

He took another sip of brandy, hoping it would burn through the mental fog he was feeling. Even as he sipped, he was fairly certain this was not the right approach, but he had no idea what he should do.

In the end, he finished two more splashes of brandy in his glass, made his uncertain way to the window, and locked it. He then wobbled his way back to his bed and lay down to let the brandy do its work. He watched the moonlit ceiling miserably, as his stomach protested the liquid he had ingested. At length, he fell asleep.

Chapter 7

The tea table was set with the best linens, her wedding crystal, and a single red rose. It was Adelaide's wedding anniversary, an event both bittersweet and precious. She watched as Mrs. Swinton artfully arranged the silverware at two places.

Since the late Duke was unable to attend, for obvious reasons, his son would sit down at table to this special tea. It was a commemorative occasion for both of them. The red rose symbolized the attendance of the late Duke, who, until his death, never missed a single anniversary, birthday, Christmas, or any other excuse to give a gift to his precious bride.

Fortunately for family peace, he gave just as enthusiastically to his son.

Adelaide had dressed carefully for the occasion. She wore a dove gray gown, with only the merest hint of black at collar and cuffs. Her hat was a new one, capably constructed by her companion's nimble fingers. Say what she might about millinery and suitability as a companion, Lady Carletane was never turned out in such good taste and elegance as Adelaide. Or at least not since Mrs. Swinton had become her companion.

What had I ever done without the capable little widow?

A soft knock at the door announced that her son had arrived. Adelaide surveyed him with pride as he handed off his hat and cane to the butler, along with a bottle of red wine. He frowned a little when he saw that only two places were set at the table.

"Will Mrs. Swinton not be joining us this afternoon?" he asked.

"Not today, my dear," Adelaide replied. "This is a commemorative

occasion, so it will be just the two of us.”

An expression, too fleeting to be called disappointment, flitted across his face. “Very well,” Darrius said, “I shall endeavor not to disappoint.”

“You never do, dear,” his mother replied. “You are everything that George and I could have wished for in a son.”

“I am glad to hear that I am satisfactory,” Darrius commented.

“Oh, you,” Adelaide chuckled, as she extended her hand to be kissed. “You know very well that you are the apple of my eye. And fear not, Mrs. Swinton will wait upon our table tonight so that we will not have the servants intruding upon us.”

“That seems ominous. Is there a particular reason why we shall have such an intimate tête-à-tête?”

“Only that I am a foolish old woman, and I wish to pretend for a short while that your father is merely away on business and might come walking through that door at any moment.”

“Egad! I hope he shall not. After being dead nearly ten years, I do not believe that seeing him arise from his grave would be a pleasant experience.”

“Dreadful boy! You know very well that is not what I meant.”

Darrius softened his expression and sat down at the other side of the table. “I do know, Mother. But I could not help but tease you a little. I have noticed that you enjoy a bit of levity in your conversations with Mrs. Swinton.”

“Oh, indeed I do! Such a relief it is to find someone with whom I can converse without being afraid that she might hack up a toad or have her hair fall out due to our topic of conversation.”

“Hack up a toad? Mother, whatever do you mean?”

“Oh, you know,” Adelaide waved an airy hand. “Toadeaters. Cough up a toad. In shock, as it were.”

Darrius gave a brief bark of laughter. "Good heavens, Mother. If you are going to carry on like that, no wonder you do not want the servants attending on us. Goodness knows what sort of idea they might get."

Adelaide leaned toward her son. "Exactly. But getting ideas is one of the things I wanted to speak to you about. It seems to me that I have perceived a growing coolness between you and Blanche."

Darrius twiddled with his pickle fork for a moment, then laid it back down. "Mother, even though we were occasional playmates in childhood, I do not believe that Blanche and I have ever developed a great deal of warmth toward each other."

"Sadly, I fear you might be right," Adelaide sighed. "But Darrius, while love is not required of a man and woman to marry, a certain amount of cordiality between you would be to the point."

"I suppose," Darrius acquiesced rather sullenly, "But..."

There came a tap at the door, and they were spared further conversation for a few minutes while two strong footmen carried in the tea.

There was enough food to feed an army. Adelaide beamed as a frothy white cake with piped-on icing roses, white bread, sweet butter, strawberries, cheese, crackers, fruit, and cracked nutmeats were all unloaded. These were followed up with eggs that had been cut in half and then refilled with the yolk mixed with spices, herbs and chopped vegetables, as well as slices of ham.

"Good heavens, Mother," Darrius said. "There is enough here to feed half the village. Why do we not set another place, and have Mrs. Swinton to sit down with us? She will hear us no better or worse when seated at the table than she is likely to do standing up and hovering over us."

"Are you sure, Darrius?" Adelaide asked. "I have no objections, but I was not sure you would quite like it."

"It will be fine, Mother. After all, she customarily takes tea with us. Why should today be different? Besides, perhaps her presence will curb some of your wilder remarks." Darrius signaled the butler and

indicated that another place should be laid.

"I am sorry, Darrius, but you are not getting any younger. Some plain speaking is in order if you are to get an heir before I follow your father to the grave."

Darrius sat down slowly. "Are you feeling poorly, Mother?"

"Actually, I feel much better than I have for many months, my dear, but that is beside the point. Time flies, especially when you are not taking note of it."

"I have noticed that on occasion," Darrius said drily.

Mrs. Swinton stepped into what threatened to become a family row, and said, "Shall I pour?"

"Please do, my dear. Now, Darrius, the reason I have asked you here on this day is not only to commemorate the happiest day of my life, but to make some progress on insuring that your wedding day will also be the happiest day of your life. By rights, it should be your father imparting this wisdom, but in his absence I must take up his staff and mantle and carry on."

"Mother..."

"No, no Darrius, it is not right that you should plunge into your approaching nuptials having no idea how to conduct yourself."

"Mother..." Darrius tried again.

"No, no, I insist. You shall not remain ignorant."

"Mother!" Darrius insisted once more. "You do not need to do this. Father had this talk when I was thirteen, when I showed interest in the downstairs maid, who was only a year or two older than I at the time. He and she made sure that I understood the mechanics."

"Good," Adelaide remarked. "Then we only need to discuss how to actually please your partner without shocking her sensibilities. It is fortunate that you have present at table not one, but two widows who were happily wed."

Sometime later, after a thoroughly coached and highly irritated Darrius had declared that he would sleep in one of the guest apartments and strode away in high dudgeon, Adelaide was slowly sorting through piles of old letters, sipping the sweet, red wine that Darrius had brought. It was so new it was nearly grape juice. Even so, it had a rich bouquet that she found pleasing. She nibbled at some sharp cheese, and thin crispy crackers left from their repast.

“Do you think Darrius would like to read the letters his father sent to me at some time?” she asked Mrs. Swinton.

“I’m sure I could not say,” her pretty companion replied, “since I have not read them myself, nor do I fully understand His Grace’s taste in reading material. Can you tell me a little about what he might encounter?”

“Well,” Adelaide took another sip of wine, “George did love to go on about the scenery and such.”

“I don’t believe His Grace would be terribly interested in that,” Mrs. Swinton put in.

It was a shocking breach of manners for her to interrupt the Duchess in that way, but Adelaide encouraged her companion to behave naturally, just as if they were two girls in finishing school, she had explained to Mrs. Swinton.

“Then, there were the lover bits,” Adelaide went on. “I do wonder if he would like to borrow some of George’s better turns of phrase for his own personal correspondence. Do you think that he might take reading his father’s words better than our instruction?”

“Perhaps you might like to keep that private?” Mrs. Swinton suggested. “I have some very dear bits that John wrote. But if I had a son, I don’t believe I would care to share their contents with him.”

Adelaide frowned at a letter. “No, I suppose not. Although, I might share them with his wife one day.”

Mrs. Swinton laughed. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

Adelaide chuckled. It was so nice to have someone who understood her. "Here, my dear. You have been married. You read it."

Mrs. Swinton looked at her dubiously. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes! Read!"

Mrs. Swinton began to read. First her eyes got big, then she sucked in a breath. Next she asked, "Is that even possible?"

"Only if you are very young and athletic, which we were," the Duchess said smugly.

"Goodness gracious!" Mrs. Swinton fanned herself with one hand. "I can quite see why you thought the letters might give His Grace some pointers. But honestly, I think I would save them for after he is married, and perhaps give them to the happy couple as a wedding gift."

Adelaide sighed. "The sad thing is, I am not at all sure that Blanche is up to such things. She is so proper, and has no affinity for natural things, such as bugs or scaling fish."

Mrs. Swinton folded in her lips, keeping them in a straight line, but her eyes danced with merriment. Then she sobered.

"That seems rather sad," she said. "John and I were not so... athletic, but all our expressions of love were warm and heartfelt."

"It is sad." Adelaide sighed. "He is going into the battle of life with a dry stick of a woman by his side. George arranged the marriage, and he had his reasons, but I am not sure that if he had lived that he would expect Darrius to go through with it."

Mrs. Swinton sank down on a hassock so as not to loom over her employer. "You feel that he is making a mistake?"

"Yes," the Duchess said. "I believe he is. But the marriage has been planned so long that were he to jilt her now, her reputation would be irreparably ruined. My boy is much too good a man to do that to his childhood playmate."

“Dear me,” Mrs. Swinton frowned in sympathy. “You are right, of course. How terribly unfortunate. I wonder if there might be some way to put her back up, and get her to cry off. Then, your son would be a rare catch for most of the mamas who have a daughter they need to have wed in the near future.”

“Possibly,” Adelaide tapped one finger on her chin. “The only thing is that Darrius has not quite got a head for business. Oh, I know, he thinks that my eyes glaze over and my brains go to sleep when he mentions buying and selling, but what it truly tells me is that he does not yet fully understand the duties of his position.”

“Indeed?” Mrs. Swinton seemed astonished.

“Indeed. He needs to trust his solicitor, or else get a new one. Darrius needs to be attending parliament, paying attention to the bigger picture, while relying on capable people to run the estate and the farm.”

Adelaide looked at the letter again. “Can such things truly be delegated?”

“Not only can, but must. Else how should the Dukes, Earls, Viscounts and all have time to see to the larger finances and running of the nation?”

“I suppose I had not thought of it like that,” Mrs. Swinton said slowly. “It is rather like saying that the butler should not be expected to do the dusting.”

“Precisely,” Adelaide said, gesturing widely with the hand that held the wine glass.

Sticky, red wine that was scarcely more than grape juice with all the syrup and sugars that implied, sloshed over Adelaide’s apron, the tablecloth, and the snowy linens of the daybed.

“The housekeeper will never let me hear the end of this!” Adelaide wailed. “Whatever shall we do?”

Chapter 8

Evelyn hurried down the corridor with the clean linens and cleaning supplies to take care of the copious wine spill on the daybed in the Duchess' chambers.

Even though the Duchess could be exceptionally outspoken, even brash at times, she had her moments of timidity. The housekeeper, who had been hired by the late Duke, could and often did, intimidate the gentle lady.

Evelyn hoped to get the bed changed and the stained sheets soaking in the laundry tubs before the housekeeper noticed and rang a peel over both their heads. She had just turned the corner in the corridor when she nearly ran into the Duke.

"Oh! Excuse me, Your Grace. I did not expect anyone to be in this corridor at this time of day."

"So I see," The Duke drawled. "So polite, so deferential, always scurrying around like a little mouse. You were so efficient with helping my mother instruct me. Perhaps you would like to instruct me further." He took a step forward, and Evelyn took an involuntary step back.

"I am sorry. Have I offended you, Your Grace?"

"Only in that you seem to be aiding my mother in hastening my wedding day." The Duke smiled, but the expression had an edge to it. "How did my mother ever talk you into helping her? Or perhaps," he said softly, "You are lonely. I would gladly help you with that," he purred, taking a step closer.

"I am sorry if you were offended, Your Grace," she replied a little desperately. "I had no idea, really, of what she had planned. But I had

little choice but to follow her lead, once the topic was established.”

The Duke took another step forward. Evelyn flattened herself against the wall, the stack of bedding held before her like a shield. “I am not in need of instruction, but perhaps you could use a little company. You are far too lovely to be languishing alone.”

“I can assure you, I am not languishing, Your Grace. My days are quite full with taking care of your mother, which is what I was hired to do. As you well know, she has already turned off several companions because they were flirting with you.”

“Then do not follow her lead when she undertakes to instruct me on that which I already know.” The Duke took a step back.

“Yes, Your Grace. I am very sorry, Your Grace. I did not mean to offend.”

“I am not so sure whether I am offended, or intrigued. Your predecessor’s attentions, while flattering, were so blatant as to be boring. You have unexpected depths as well as exceptional beauty. I will want a mistress after I am wed. I am certain of it. Perhaps you would like that position?”

“No, Your Grace. Please, do not ask me again. I need this work, and I do not wish to exchange this job for the other.”

“Are you quite certain?” the Duke smiled gently at her. “I always take good care of my... interests.”

“Very certain, Your Grace. Pray excuse me, but I am in something of a hurry. There was an accident with a wine glass, and I must return with the clean linens.”

“Mrs. Swinton,” a voice came from behind the Duke, “The Duchess is asking for you. Oh, hello, Your Grace. Begging your pardon, your mother is in some distress and desires her companion.”

“I must go to her at once!” Evelyn said, taking advantage of the distraction to duck around the Duke and hurry down the hall. As she passed the cook, he tipped her a wink.

“Your Grace,” she heard him say sententiously, “I have a new pie that I would like for you to taste. Would it be too great an imposition?”

Evelyn hurried around the corner and hastened toward the Duchess’ rooms. Her heart pounded so loudly in her chest, she was certain everyone could hear it. What had the Duchess started? Certainly the Duke was an attractive man, but she had no desire to be anyone’s mistress!

When she arrived, she understood the wink. The Duchess was placidly inspecting the stain, as if inspecting it would make it go away. But when Evelyn entered, although visible relief washed over the Duchess’ face, she gave no indication of having sent anyone to look for her.

“There you are, my dear. I was beginning to be concerned. I am terribly afraid the stain has leaked into the mattress.”

“Do not worry, Your Grace,” Evelyn comforted her. “We shall have it right in a trice.”

Setting the clean linens aside, Evelyn quickly stripped the bed, setting the stained sheet in the pail she had brought along. She then sprinkled a thick layer of salt on the mattress stain. The salt quickly began to change color, as it leached the wine out of the fibers.

Carefully, Evelyn brushed up the salt onto a plate, continuing until the wine was only a faint stain on the fabric. She then folded and placed a towel over the damp spot, made sure there was no moisture to seep through, then made up the bed.

“That is wonderful!” the dowager exclaimed. “How ever did you learn to do that?”

Evelyn smiled a little sadly. “I was John’s nurse because we could afford no one else. There were many stains.”

“I am so sorry that I reminded you, my dear,” the Duchess said. “But thank you for rescuing me.”

“It will be our secret,” Evelyn declared. “Would you like to play a rubber or two of cards before retiring?”

"I think I would rather hear more about you, my dear. What was life like for you as a child?"

"Ordinary," Evelyn said. "My father was a carpenter, my mother took in sewing. There were twelve of us, so they had to step lively to keep us all fed. As soon as each of us was old enough, we found work so that we could help."

"Twelve! Oh, my heavens," the Duchess declared. "What a brood! Your mother must have been driven to distraction, for I am sure from what you are saying that there was not a nanny."

"Goodness, no," Evelyn laughed. "As soon as we older ones could manage, we had chores and we helped look after the little ones. Mostly, we were happy, I think."

"Were you? What happened later?"

"We all grew up. Mama and Papa both came down with a virulent fever. No one knew for sure what it was, but they were both gone before most of us could make it home for more than the funeral."

"I am so sorry," the Duchess said, "I seem to be mostly raking up old memories tonight."

"Not entirely," Evelyn said. "There were good times. I try to think about those."

They sat silent for a minute or two, then the Duchess said, "I think I would like to play a rubber or two. Do you remember where we put the cards?"

"Of course I do," Evelyn said.

They played for a little while, then the dowager said, "I'm feeling a bit peckish, my dear. Could you go down to the kitchen and fetch me a little something?"

"Of course," Evelyn said. "Is there anything in particular that you would like?"

"Perhaps some milk tea. Oh, and something sweet. I wonder if there

might be bubbly pies?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Evelyn replied. “But I will ask. Mr. Rudge usually has a little something put by for you.”

“Whatever he has, I am sure it will be lovely,” the dowager said. “Such a sweet boy, a little younger than is usual for the head of a kitchen, but one could not ask for better.”

“He does make delicious food,” Evelyn agreed. “I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

Evelyn quickly slipped out the door and down the servants’ stair. After her experience in the afternoon, she was careful to check around each corner before hurrying on. She thought it unlikely that the Duke would be about, but she wanted to be certain that she did not run into him again.

When she reached the kitchen, she found Mr. Rudge leafing through a tattered copy of *The Frugal Housewife*, and making notes on a piece of foolscap paper, using a stubby pencil.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” she said, “But Her Grace would like a little something.”

“I have just the thing for her,” he replied. “A nice blancmange that turned out beautifully.”

“Could I get a little milk tea, as well?” Evelyn asked. “She has had a trying afternoon. I think it would help her sleep.”

“Of course,” Mr. Rudge smiled. “I will add a little turmeric. There was... an old Indian fellow who lived in my neighborhood who swore by the stuff.”

Evelyn watched as he heated the milk and stirred in the spice, turning the hot liquid a golden yellow. Mr. Rudge’s movements were deft and sure, almost like a dancer as he went from hearth to the spice cabinet and back again. Although it was hard to tell beneath the thick, white cloth that was his cook’s uniform, he seemed to be well muscled, like an athlete. A tight-fitting cap, not like the baker’s hat he wore to accept thanks for meal preparation, kept his dark hair out of his face.

Evelyn imagined for a moment what it might be like to dance with him. He would, no doubt, be graceful and in time with the music. She knew he could sing for she had surprised him once or twice humming over the pots. He said that he could more easily time the cooking of sauces and the like by how many verses it took for them to thicken. She gave herself a mental shake. It was only the Duchess' instruction of her son, she thought severely to herself. John was her one true love, and she was fortunate to have had him. Now, she had their bills to pay and no time for romantic nonsense.

Mr. Rudge carefully spooned just a little sugar to the mix, then turned to face her. "That should do it," he said. "Now just a little care with arranging the tray..." He covered the top of the cup with a linen cap, then a tea cozy. He then set the blancmange in its dish onto the tray, and arranged a few candied mint leaves around it, then a spoon that was neatly rolled into a napkin.

"Lovely!" Evelyn exclaimed. "It looks too beautiful to eat."

"I assure you that it is completely edible," Mr. Rudge smiled at her. "If you do not mind, I will carry it up for you. The stairs are a little tricky at night."

"Not at all. That would be wonderful," Evelyn said. She had been dreading trying to get that tray up the stairs without spilling something.

"How did you learn to cook so well?" Evelyn asked.

"Kitchens have always been my favorite place," he replied. "There was one particular cook who would let me hang about, and even sent me on errands. Soon I learned the difference between a carrot and a parsnip, so to speak."

Evelyn laughed softly at this sally. "A carrot from a parsnip... well, they are both root crops and they are more or less the same shape."

"But definitely not the same flavor," Mr. Rudge beamed at her. "You catch on quick. I would bet that you know your way around the inside of a kitchen."

"To some degree, yes. But the things I cook certainly do not turn out the same way as yours."

As they entered the upper halls, they both fell silent. The Dower House was largely empty, with only a few servants and the dowager in residence. But the Duke had been spending the night, of late, so none of the serving maids went about alone.

The Duchess greeted them with a smile. "You helped her carry the tray up, Mr. Rudge. What a dear boy. What do you have for me tonight?"

"A blancmange with candied mint leaves, and golden milk," Mr. Rudge replied. "I was glad to carry it up. Those stairs are tricky when one is carrying a tray at night."

"Always so thoughtful. Do you know that the maids always have good things to say about you, Mr. Rudge?"

"Do they? I am sure I would not know. I am glad to have their good regard."

"Yes, indeed. Do you mind if I taste before you go?"

"Not at all," Mr. Rudge replied. "I hope it is to your liking."

The dowager took up her spoon, and dipped it into the confection, then she nibbled a little of one of the mint leaves. "Perfection," she pronounced. "It takes genius to make blancmange taste like anything, and this is divine. Thank you so much for bringing it up."

Mr. Rudge apparently knew a dismissal when he heard one, for he bowed and said, "I am glad you like it. *Bon appetite*, Your Grace. Good night."

After he had withdrawn, the Duchess continued to spoon up the treat. When the last of the blancmange was eaten and the final sip of golden milk gone, she said, "That makes my poor tummy feel calm and satisfied. How he makes the dishes my physician recommends palatable I shall never know, but I am infinitely grateful."

"He does seem to be an excellent cook. And the maids do, indeed, speak well of him," Evelyn observed.

"Quite so," said the Duchess. "What do you think of him, my dear?"

“He seems exceptionally amiable without being forward or pushing,” she replied. “I do not know him well, but from our few encounters, I find him to be a person of good sense, with a kindly attitude toward others.”

For a moment she wondered how a cook could develop such a well-muscled form, and such grace. But perhaps he had been something else before he was a cook. A gymnast, she thought idly, or he could even have been a dancer. In all events, not her business.

She put him firmly out of her mind and set about the small chores needed while the Duchess’ maid helped her prepare for bed. But a tiny seed of thought had lodged in her mind. As she closed her eyes that night, she could see again the graceful stretch of muscle as Mr. Rudge reached up to take the dessert out of the cupboard, and the well-bred timbre of his voice as he gracefully accepted the Duchess’ thanks.

Foolish, completely foolish, she chided herself. Go to sleep, Evelyn. Tomorrow will be another long day.

Chapter 9

Evelyn hurried down the steps to the kitchen, carrying the two trays with the empty dishes from the Duchess' late-night snack atop them. At the bottom, her steps slowed. What could she say to Mr. Rudge? Thank you seemed banal, and begged the question of what she was thanking him for. Was it for deceiving their employer? Offering a distraction? Either could apply, yet both suggested wrongdoing on the Duke's part. Thank you for carrying the trays? For taking such good care of the Duchess and her needs? None of it seemed quite right.

Nonetheless, she continued on, for the trays and dishes must go back to the kitchen.

As she opened the door, she beheld an astonishing sight. Mr. Rudge seemed to be battling an unseen opponent. He leaped into the air delivering what would have been a lethal kick had anyone been standing before him. He came down in a graceful roll that had him facing the opposite direction. Immediately he began punching and poking at his unseen adversary, sometimes with fist, sometimes with the tips of his fingers. His face was wild, as if belonging to someone demented.

"Mr. Rudge?" Evelyn called timidly.

Mr. Rudge halted mid-lunge, drawing himself back into a semblance of civilized order. "Mrs. Swinton! I hope I did not startle you. I am merely engaging in a little shadow boxing. It keeps me in good form, you see. I must do something to work off all the tasting I do during a day."

Evelyn recovered her equanimity, swallowed and said, "That was quite impressive. I am very glad not to be your adversary."

Mr. Rudge shrugged a little diffidently. "I have never had occasion to

use it for real. I learned it from the same gentleman from the East who recommended the turmeric milk. Here, let me take those trays. You should have rung, and I would have sent someone up for them.”

“I wanted an excuse to speak with you, Mr. Rudge. I wanted to thank you for distracting the Duke today.”

Mr. Rudge sighed. “The Duke is a fine gentleman in every sense of the word. As such, he cannot imagine why a kitchen maid or even a companion would not welcome his attentions. While not all peers behave so, our Duke has a certain reputation. The Duchess is completely blind to it, of course. Your predecessor succumbed to his charms, and when she came up in the family way, the Duchess dismissed her as a matter of course.”

“Oh, dear! What became of her?”

“The Duke, who is to some degree a responsible gentleman, set her up in a cottage on the lower side of the village and arranged for her to be married. It isn’t a very happy marriage, I fear. Her new husband relies on the largess from the Duke to maintain the household. Of late, the fellow has taken up drinking up his own wages and a good part of the largess, leaving the former companion to take in laundry and the like to support herself and the baby.”

“That is terrible!” Evelyn exclaimed. “Something should be done.”

“Something is being done, as much as can be,” Mr. Rudge replied. “The constable has his eye on the fellow, and the village ladies do as much as they can for the woman. She is proud, however, and does not wish to be dependent on charity.”

“Now that I know about this, I am doubly grateful to you. Although, I do not think I should be so foolish as to be taken in by any gentleman, nor so poor-spirited as to succumb to him.”

“Perhaps you are quick to judge, Mrs. Swinton.” Mr. Rudge looked troubled.

“Oh, dear. I do not mean to be. But every shop girl knows what lies down that particular slippery path.”

“True enough. But when a young woman is employed by a great

house, there are many ways that the young master can put pressure on her, not the least of which is being turned off without references.”

“I suppose so,” Evelyn agreed. “Shortly before I was hired on here, I interviewed for a house where the Lord made suggestive remarks, something about what might happen to me if someone was to buy up my debts. Fortunately, the physician who cared for my husband holds all of my debts, and I do not think he would sell them off.”

“That is good to know,” Mr. Rudge said soberly. “But what if the physician fell on hard times? Would not those debts be part of his assets?”

“And could be sold at auction,” Evelyn said soberly. “Fortunately, I believe him to be at least comfortable, if not well off. He has society patrons as well as his charity patients. He is the Duchess’ own physician, I might add, which is partially how I came to be offered this position.”

“Was your husband a charity patient, Mrs. Swinton?”

“Not at first. Mr. Swinton was a hard worker, and a frugal man. As soon as he realized that he was mortally ill, he started taking extra jobs and setting aside money against the time when he could not work.” Then she looked troubled. “I fear he might have hastened his death in the hope of making me secure.”

“Any man who was a man would have done that, Mrs. Swinton. If he truly knew that he was dying, I do not believe he could have done otherwise. Not if he loved you at all.”

“I think he did,” she said slowly, reflecting on the past. “I certainly loved him. Toward the end, there was very little left save the illness and trying to make him comfortable. He would not kiss or hold me, for fear of passing the illness to me. Indeed, he begged me to get someone else to care for him lest I be made ill also.”

“A good man, then,” Mr. Rudge comforted her. “And one who loved you well. While it is a great trial to be the one left behind, you were fortunate to have been the object of such adoration.”

“I suppose.” Evelyn sighed. “But I would have just as soon had a living husband, even if he tended to stay late at the local inn on a Friday

night, or usually slept in a-Sunday instead of going to church.”

“Better a living man than a dead saint,” Mr. Rudge nodded. “I quite understand.”

“Have you lost someone, Mr. Rudge? You seem knowledgeable in the ways of grief.”

“My father,” he replied. “He also had a lingering illness, although his did not seem to have any specific cause. When he passed from this life, I tried to carry on. But my own health seemed likely to suffer, so one day I simply walked away.”

“Do you regret it?” Evelyn asked.

“Not really. I find ‘cook’ to be a fulfilling role in life. I prepare good foods that will sustain life, and sometimes even heal. Or at least Her Grace’s physician is of the opinion that they will.”

“I think he might be on to something there, Mr. Rudge. Especially when he has such a willing ally as yourself who can make his food prescriptions into something delightful, rather than a chore to consume.”

“Speaking of that, Mrs. Swinton, I have saved back a few scraps for you.” Mr. Rudge went to a small cupboard on the wall well away from the fireplace and withdrew a covered plate. “I had meant to send them up to your room tonight, but since you are here perhaps you would not mind keeping me company at my own supper?”

Evelyn stepped farther into the kitchen. “That would be a pleasure, Mr. Rudge, as long as all we are discussing is supper.”

“Only that, and plenty of it, Mrs. Swinton. I believe that your long months of nursing your husband, followed by the arduous task of caring for the Dowager Duchess, has taken its toll on you.”

“Are you trying to fatten me up, Mr. Rudge?” Evelyn teased gently.

“I am hoping to put a little meat on your bones, yes,” he replied with a grin. “Besides, if you share a meal with me, you might also stay and talk for a little while. I am afraid that most of the kitchen staff are

doing well to write their own name or to puzzle out the ingredients in a recipe. I grow lonely for conversation that goes beyond the village gossip.”

“Then I will be glad to sit at table with you, Mr. Rudge.”

Evelyn smiled as he laid out crackers, cheese, apples, and a few small pieces of sliced meats.

“The Duchess does not stint the help,” Mr. Rudge said. “I am charged with feeding anyone from the household who might wander through my kitchen day or night. So do not fear that we might be breaking some house rule.”

“She is such a charming person,” Evelyn said. “I had heard such horror stories about being a companion, but she is wonderful.”

And so are you, Mr. Rudge. I wonder if you realize just how unusual and special you are? Many in your position would abuse their power, but you make the care and well-being of the household your particular charge.

Aloud, she said, “Goodness! This is a lot of food.”

“The better to fatten you up, my dear,” Mr. Rudge said in his best theater villain voice.

Evelyn laughed, and began to feel a lonely place that had been growing since her husband had died, to feel a little less empty.

Perhaps life could be worth living, after all. I can, at least, have a few good friends to help fill the emptiness.

Chapter 10

Mayson could scarcely believe his luck. She consented to sit at the kitchen table with him! He supposed that it might be somewhat inappropriate, but the kitchen was not a private place. Anyone could come wandering through at any time, seeking food, comfort, and perhaps even some advice.

Mayson was not quite sure how the advice part had come to be. He was, after all, much younger than most head cooks. But perhaps it was because he was younger, and therefore perhaps a little less intimidating than the butler or the housekeeper. However it might have come about, he was often the confidant and gatekeeper for the younger staff members and their small concerns. In all events, it meant that the kitchen was often a lively place where the younger staff members might gather at any hour.

"Is this not late for you?" Mrs. Swinton asked. "Not that I do not appreciate a good meal. I usually have a little something squirreled away for after Her Grace has gone to bed."

"To some degree," Mayson replied. "But I have made arrangements with the potboy to start the fires and put the loaves in the oven to bake. He has done it a time or two now, with good success. I think I might be able to begin training him to be the undercook."

"That will be pleasant for both of you," Mrs. Swinton observed. "It is kind of you to take him under your tutelage. Many cooks are so jealous of their position that they would as soon cut off an arm as share their secrets."

"Ah, but where would I be if a kindly cook had not allowed me to run tame in the kitchen, getting underfoot, and then being put to work at various menial tasks until I finally began to learn the secrets of proper cookery."

Mrs. Swinton buttered a cracker, then placed a thin slice of cheese atop it. She contemplated it a moment then asked, "What was he like? The cook who taught you."

"Gruff. Solid. He was not loud or angry-sounding like some cooks can be. He used a bosun's whistle to get the attention of the staff. There was a special whistle for each person, and he expected them to quickly learn the tune that meant they were to attend him. There were also whistles for dishing up, adding wood, and more. It was quite complex."

"Oh, dear! What a tangle that would have been for someone new!"

"It could be. Fortunately, for all his gruffness, he was a patient person with those who truly did not know. He was less patient with those who did not pay attention or try to learn."

"What became of him?" Mrs. Swinton fixed her gaze upon him. Tonight, her eyes were a deep green, almost black in the dim light of the nighttime kitchen. It made her look enigmatic, he thought, like some ancient forest goddess stepped out of the dawn of time.

"To the best of my knowledge, he is still cooking in the same kitchen where I learned. I've rambled around a bit since then. Cooked for the army for a while, then for an inn or two. This place suits me. Big enough to be a challenge, but not so large that I must toil day and night to oversee providing food for everyone."

"You were in the army?"

Mayson nodded. "For a while. Once it was discovered that I had a talent for making the scrawny chickens and dried meat that were our main rations actually taste like something edible, I saw very little of the fighting unless our camp was overrun."

"Did that happen often?"

The softly curling eyelashes around the deep green eyes blinked, while she gazed at him steadily, waiting for the answer to her question. A man could get lost in those eyes, drown in them. She was so beautiful. It was no wonder that she had attracted the Duke's attention.

Mayson dragged his attention back to their conversation, trying not to

act like a complete mooncalf. "Every now and then. Often enough that my batman kept my things packed at all times so's we could move at a moment's notice."

"You had a batman? I thought only officers had them." Mrs. Swinton seemed puzzled.

"In the army, a head cook is an officer. As quartermaster, I was responsible not only for myself, but also for my staff and all the supplies. Sometimes what ran over our camp was not actual army—it was a rabble hoping for food."

"How dreadful! What did you do then?"

"As often as possible, shunted them off. When we could spare it, I would give out bread. Only plain bread. Our men needed the meat. There was not enough to give any of that away."

"I am amazed that there was flour enough to make bread. I had heard that it was in short supply."

"I will let you in on a little secret. If horses can eat grain, so can the men. I had my lads grind the corn that was given as fodder, and had them gleaning the fields for hay and grass for the horses."

"Did your commanding officer know about this?"

Mayson laughed. "Not a bit of it. He was too busy with his maps, maneuvers, and trying to get gunpowder for the muskets and the cannon. As long as food of some description appeared on his camp table, he did not care where it came from."

"Oh, my! So you had free rein?"

"To some extent. My best kitchen boys kept getting sent off on other duties, so I was frequently retraining. We were all a good bit leaner when peace was declared."

"So here you are, cooking for the Duchess. How..."

"Ah, but that is a tale for another time. I have talked quite enough about me."

“Oh, no. I could listen to you talk forever,” Mrs. Swinton said sincerely. “You make the simplest things, like grinding animal fodder for bread, into an interesting story.”

“I am glad you find it so. I can assure you that I am immeasurably glad of the excellent flour that is delivered to the Dower House.”

“To be sure. The Duke is immensely generous with his mother. Today was quite unusual. Under most circumstances, he is a complete gentleman.”

“What made today different, do you think?” Mayson asked. He had heard different stories from the maids, many of whom said it was best to be elsewhere when the Duke was roaming the halls.

“The Duchess is anxious to see her son wed while she is still young enough to enjoy the grandchildren. She undertook to instruct him in his duties as a married man, including exercises in the bedroom, and she insisted that I help with the instruction. The Duchess can be quite outspoken at times. I believe it stirred his libido.”

Mayson laughed. “Oh, dear, she did not.”

“She did. Fortunately, he informed her that the... who did he say? The under-stairs maid, when he was fifteen? I think that was right. Anyway, he bluntly informed his mother that the maid in question had taken care of any necessary instruction in that department.”

“Oh, my,” Mayson could only shake his head and grin.

“Ah, but I should not be gossiping about the Dowager and her son. It is rude of me, and not at all discreet.”

“I promise it will go no further than my ears, Mrs. Swinton. But I do see how such talk might have given the Duke the wrong impression.”

“Thank you so much for understanding. And for the rescue. It allowed me to get away without making a scene. Moreover, to do it quickly enough to take care of the wine spill before it had a chance to set. Even so, I am not sure that tablecloth or the sheets will ever be quite the same again.”

“We have an amazingly canny washerwoman. Wine, blood, rancid butter, grass, or ground in dirt, she manages it all.”

“That is a relief. The Duchess seems to live in mortal fear of offending the housekeeper to such extent that she might leave.”

“I can readily believe that. Mrs. Henshaw can be a regular dragon. Even I walk warily around her, and so does Mr. Wilson. I fear the entire household would fall apart without her, however. She has been here forever, it seems, and knows exactly what is going on at all times. I am not quite sure how she does it. She is not a large or imposing woman.”

“Indeed, no,” Mrs. Swinton agreed. “She is dainty and birdlike. But not even Bronwyn, who is a big-boned country lass, offers to stand up to her. The footmen are quite terrified of her, I believe.”

“She does seem to have a way of making an impression,” Mayson agreed. “How is she with you?”

“No one could possibly be kinder,” Mrs. Swinton assured him. “She is direct and clear in her instructions, and I have never found fault with them. I am quite impressed. Should I ever be so fortunate as to be hired as a housekeeper, I shall certainly take her as a model.”

“Indeed?” Mayson was surprised at that.

“Indeed. You know exactly where you are with her at all times.”

“So why is the Duchess so intimidated by her?”

“Her Grace is a wonderful person, but she is a free spirit in every sense of the word. I am not sure that Mrs. Henshaw quite approves of the Duchess. It shows in her manner and in the way she deals with her.”

“How strange. Amazing that it has not gotten her turned off.”

“Mrs. Henshaw has a slight advantage there.”

“How so?” Mayson asked.

“She used to be the Duchess’ nanny. In fact, she was also the Duke’s head nursemaid, so it was a natural progression from head of the nursery to head of the housekeeping staff.”

Mayson just shook his head. “You amaze me. I’ve been here for months, and even though the younger staff often confide in me, this is the first I have heard of this.”

“Her Grace is a very lonely person, Mr. Rudge. You have no idea how much your simple kindness with the special foods and carrying things up from the kitchen for me have meant to her.”

“I am glad to have been of service,” Mayson said, a little embarrassed.

Mrs. Swinton finished her drink and said, “This has been lovely. But I must go. I will need to be up before Her Grace to make sure of plans for the day.”

“Of course. Thank you for sharing my late-night repast. I do not often have the opportunity for extended conversation with anyone.”

Mayson rose, and politely pulled out Mrs. Swinton’s chair, assisting her to rise. “Mrs. Swinton, this has been so pleasurable. Could I beg a favor?”

“That depends on what it is,” she returned, warily.

“Nothing untoward, I assure you. But I believe that we will have the same half day this se’nnight. Could I persuade you to a picnic in the park below the bowling green? I contemplate nothing but sharing food and conversation, I assure you.”

“I would be delighted, Mr. Rudge. This has been a pleasure. I shall look forward to sharing food and conversation.”

She offered him her hand, and he took it gently in his. He bowed over it, and politely kissed the air above it, as if she were a lady.

“Thank you for the kind invitation,” she said, withdrawing her hand politely. “But now I must go lest I oversleep tomorrow.”

She turned and hurried away, her soft slippers making little shushing

sounds on the stone floor.

Mayson held one hand over the other, savoring the memory of the feel of her hand. He should plan something special for the picnic. Something purchased with his own money, not drawn from stores. In his mind, they were already seated at the stone table near the old willow tree, with the brook rushing nearby. She was beyond extraordinary.

Chapter 11

Darrius frowned at the account balance sheet his solicitor was showing him.

How could it have possibly gotten so low?

“So you see, Your Grace,” the fellow was saying, “Unless we turn off some of the workers or reduce the kitchen budget, there is not enough money for a new carriage.”

Darrius sighed. “Well enough. We shall simply have to refurbish the old one.”

The agent was silent for a few minutes.

Darrius stared at him. “Let me guess, not enough to refurbish it, either?”

“Your Grace,” his solicitor said deferentially, “We have just exactly enough to get through spring planting. When the crops begin to yield, then we might be able to refurbish the old carriage.”

Darrius thought for a few minutes. “Perhaps we could make do with fewer plowmen...”

“Ill advised, Your Grace. Fewer plowmen mean fewer fields tilled. Fewer fields tilled...”

“Means reduced crops, which leads to reduced income,” Darrius finished the sentence for him. “What if we were to borrow the money?”

“Your Grace, you have mortgaged everything to the hilt. Borrowing

more is ill advised. As it is, if the crops fail, or the market falls, you will have difficulty paying your notes.”

“So I must go about looking shabby, advertising to the world that the Duke of Tolware is reduced to wearing last year’s fashions and riding in an elderly carriage that was purchased more than twenty years ago? What happens if an axle breaks?”

“I am sure I don’t know, Your Grace,” the man said apologetically. “Perhaps,” he added slyly, “You should move up your marriage to Miss Notley. The dowry might go a long way toward staving off creditors and might even extend to a new carriage and perhaps a new suit or two.”

“Faugh!” Darrius snorted in disgust. “I’ll be doing my duty by that dry stick of a woman soon enough. You would wish me to be doing it sooner?”

The solicitor kept on a strict poker face. “You never know, Your Grace, she might surprise you with unexpected passions.”

“Her only passion is fine jewelry. Chances are, instead of improving my fortunes, she will beggar me. You are my business manager. Surely you can manage to extract a little more profit from this estate? What if we should raise the rents?”

“Your Grace,” the fellow said, “Have you ever seen a peasant revolt?”

“No,” Darrius said.

“I have. Harvests have been poor the last two years, what with the strange weather and all. If you raise the rents, the farmers and shop keepers will begin to grow hungry. Hungry people become restless, then they revolt. I can assure you that raising the rents is the last thing you should do. Our people are already paying all they can.”

“Very well, no new carriage, no added wardrobe. I shall have to trust my man’s genius with starch and needle to get me through the next several months.”

“It would be the prudent course, Your Grace,” the solicitor said, folding up the account books, and preparing to retire to his office. “If I might be excused?”

“Go, go!” Darrius flapped a dismissive hand at him. “I do not know why I bothered to speak to you at all. You croak like an old crow.”

The solicitor wisely said nothing at all, merely folded up his books and went out the door.

Darrius glowered at the blotter on his desk. His father had always handled all the transactions himself, but Darrius had heard that gentlemen were better served to hire an expert in these matters. Thus far, the only result had been a curtailment of his personal spending allowance.

“I’ll go over to the Dower House and visit with my mother,” he said out loud to the empty room. “Perhaps I will at least be able to amuse myself by looking at the companion.”

And perhaps this time I will have better success luring her into one of the bedrooms. What ill fortune that the cook should happen along just at that particular moment. Although, I must admit, she looked more frightened than intrigued.

He did not voice the latter thought aloud, however. There were some things better left unsaid.

Darrius shrugged carelessly into his greatcoat without calling for his man. This rumpled the sleeves of his jacket, causing them to bunch and put him in a great deal of discomfort. He tugged down the sleeves, wriggling around to settle the layers of fabric, then jammed his hat upon his head and set off for the Dower House.

Outside, his mood improved somewhat. The walk from the Main House to the Dower House might not be quite as picturesque as his father’s account of Hillsworth, but it was a respectable panorama. Little bowers with benches were set at intervals along the way. In the distance, the plowmen were hard at work, and the fields were taking orderly shape.

It was a scene that suggested prosperity and well-being, which soothed his ruffled feelings a great deal. So much so, in fact, that he was in quite a jaunty mood by the time he entered his mother’s house and knocked on her drawing room door.

“Darrius!” she exclaimed with delight. “What an unexpected pleasure.

Do come in and sit down. Mrs. Swinton, be a dear and run down to see what we might have in the way of a special tea.”

“It will be my pleasure, Your Grace,” Mrs. Swinton replied courteously. So saying, she set aside her sewing and went quickly out the door.

“I am glad to see you, my dear,” his mother said. “But you look a bit rumpled. How could your man let you out the door looking like that!”

“I, uh, sort of dodged him,” Darrius replied, feeling like a little boy who has been caught out.

“Well, never mind. Let Wilson take your coat and hat. He will furbish you up before you step back outside.”

Darrius resigned himself to allowing the aging butler to help him out of his coat.

When the fellow had stepped out of the room, the Duchess commanded, “Now tell Mother what has you in such a taking that you dodged your man.”

“I spoke with my solicitor this morning,” Darrius began.

“Oh, dear!” The Duchess flung up her hands in horror. She then reached up and tugged on the bellpull. When the butler answered the summons, she said, “Please have a decanter of brandy sent in. My son has had a difficult morning.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the butler replied, withdrawing.

Darrius felt a flash of vindication, and a lightening of his mood thanks to his mother’s sympathy. “Thank you for that,” he said. “It was a rather trying session.”

“What happened to upset you so?”

“Well, the old carriage is getting rather shabby. I would like to replace it, but the stupid man says that if I do that, there will not be enough money to pay all the workers for the spring planting.”

“Oh, dear!” the Duchess clicked her tongue, “I can quite sympathize. It is things like that which caused your father to dismiss his man of business and do it all himself. However,” she added judiciously, “I am not at all sure we were the better for it. George was a dear man, but he did not quite have a head for business. He appealed to my father, who was alive at the time, for help.”

“What happened, Mother?”

“Well, Darrius, Father loaned us a thousand pounds to get our affairs in order and insisted that we re-hire the solicitor. Then he remarked that he was glad he had tied up my inheritance so that George... um, what was the phrase he used? Oh, yes. Could not make ducks and drakes of it.”

“Can you lend me the money for a new carriage?” Darrius asked wheedlingly.

“Oh, darling, you know I would if I could. But my allowance is small. It pays the servants here, and provides victualing and incidentals for the house so that you are spared the burden of it. You could lessen the amount that you add to my household for a few months if you wish. But unless your carriage costs less than forty pounds, I’m afraid a loan is out of the question.”

Darrius knew very well that a new carriage would cost a great deal more than forty pounds. In fact, the least expensive one he had considered cost nearly four hundred guineas. It was an impossible sum, yet for the want of it, he would be forced to ride about in the old family coach or be reduced to hiring a conveyance to go about town. It simply did not bear thinking on.

“Do not pull such a long face, my son. The crops will surely be better this year, and at summer’s end you may very well be able to purchase a new coach before the London season. Look, here is Mrs. Swinton and Mr. Rudge with a fine tea for us.”

Darrius would have been just as happy to do without the cook, but he had to admit that the young woman would never have been able to carry two trays by herself.

Mrs. Swinton was dressed a little differently today, he noted. She was still dressed in black, but instead of the high collared jacket and skirt,

she was wearing a gown with a round neckline. Fine linen ruching, edged with black, modestly concealed her bosom, and she had exchanged the black lace cap for a white one with black edging.

She must be giving up strict mourning. Perhaps I will now have a chance to persuade her into my bed. She is quite appealing, and would be an excellent last fling before my marriage. Perhaps I could talk her into becoming my mistress even after I am married.

The thought cheered him immensely, so he put himself out to be pleasant all during tea.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Swinton stuck close to his mother, and gave him not even a chance to brush her fingers with his when she served the tea.

“Would you like for me to read to you?” Mrs. Swinton solicitously asked his mother after the tea things were taken away.

“If you do not mind, dear,” the Duchess requested. “I would enjoy it greatly. I believe we were reading George’s account of walking on the moors.”

“Indeed, we were,” Mrs. Swinton responded.

“Darrius, would you care to stay and listen? It was one of my favorite journeys with your father. It was nearly two years after you were born, and we were hoping that the trip would result in a little brother or sister for you.”

“I’ve heard it before,” Darrius replied ungraciously. “I think I’ll go back to the Main House and see if I can discover some ways to economize.”

“That is the spirit,” his mother encouraged him. “I am sure that you will come up with something in no time. That way you can have the new carriage for when you and dear Blanche are wed.”

This was an unwelcome reminder of his upcoming nuptials, but he dared not let his mother know his true feelings. A great many things, including holding off his creditors, depended on going through with the arranged marriage.

After I am wed, I will have control of her money as well as my own. Then I will be able to get out of debt and to buy a carriage and a perch phaeton if I wish, and even maintain them in London. Then I should easily be able to persuade the stuck-up little companion to become my mistress.

With these cheerful thoughts, he trudged merrily back to the Main House, little suspecting the surprises that lay ahead.

Chapter 12

Mayson cheerfully packed a new willow basket with treats

he had purchased out of his own pay. There was a hard sausage smoked by the local butcher, a lovely wedge of cheese, and soft rolls of his own making.

He did bend his principles enough to use a little flour from the common store to make the rolls, especially since he made enough for everyone to have some.

There was also a neat little crate of strawberries, purchased from the estate's gardener, a covered container of clotted cream, some sweet butter, and a full dozen sweet biscuits. There was a bottle of cold tea and another of sweet, fresh cider. Over it all he tucked a red and white checkered tablecloth, and over that a rough blanket.

He was just beginning to wonder if Mrs. Swinton would actually go picnicking with him when she came down the inner stairs, her outdoor shoes clicking on the stone.

"Oh!" She said, seeming startled. "I almost did not know you. You look rather splendid."

Mayson gave her a little half bow. "Thank you, Mrs. Swinton. I will own I dusted off my best suit in honor of the occasion. I have just finished packing our feast. Are you ready?"

"Indeed I am!" she replied merrily. "I will be glad to see the out of doors. It has been so long since I went on a picnic. Years, actually. My sisters and I shared one not long before the youngest was married. Now, we are all scattered to the winds." She sighed a little, but quickly recovered herself. "How lovely it will be to walk out in the sunshine."

It was a beautiful day. Mayson carried the picnic basket on his right arm, and offered his left to Mrs. Swinton. "I am pleased to offer you a special occasion," he said.

"Thank you," she replied. "It is so very nice of you to think of me."

Mayson could think of nothing to say to that, other than, "You are welcome." They strolled along in companionable silence, soaking up the warm sunshine and listening to the birds sing. The air was scented with freshly mown grass and the clouds of honeysuckle that draped over the picket fences that lined the lane.

A rustic table and two benches stood beneath the willow tree, but Mayson ushered Mrs. Swinton past that, and under the willow itself. A sturdy plank platform had been built there. Sconces were set at the four corners of the platform, each containing a smudge pot. Mayson set the basket just to one side of the entry edge of the platform. Taking a box of congrevs from his pocket, he set about lighting the smudges. They filled the air with the pungent scent of burning herbs.

"What is that for?" Mrs. Swinton asked. "It smells pleasant, but won't the smoke be a bother?"

"The breeze should send the smoke out toward the water," Mayson replied. "Or at least I hope it will. Without the smudge pot, we would quickly be nibbled to death by midges."

Mrs. Swinton laughed. "Not a pleasant way to picnic. But what a lovely view!" She gazed out over the wide expanse of the brook, which was nearly in full spate, thanks to the spring rains. It tumbled and burred its way past them. On the other side, they could see sheep and cattle grazing.

Mayson first spread the thick blanket, then added the red and white tablecloth. He then began to set out the picnic things.

"Oh, do let me help!" Mrs. Swinton protested.

"No, no," Mayson waved her off. "This is my special treat. Another half-day, it can be your treat, and we will go somewhere or do something of your choosing."

"It all looks so delicious!" she exclaimed.

"I am glad you think so, Mrs. Swinton," Mayson replied.

"Oh, do call me Evelyn," she said. "There is no need to be formal today."

Mayson felt a tiny thrill of excitement. "I would like that, above all things," he said. "And you must call me Mayson, not Mr. Rudge."

"Thank you," Evelyn replied. "We shall be like school children, using each other's first names." She sat down gracefully on one edge of the blanket.

Mayson seated himself at the other corner of the blanket. "Did you go to school, Mrs.—I mean, Evelyn?"

"To be sure, I did. Mother and Father scrimped and saved to make sure that every one of us could read and write. We were very fortunate in that a retired tutor lived on our street. He found teaching the local children to be an excellent way to add to the small stipend his former lord paid him."

"That is fortunate," Mayson agreed. "That explains why you are so well read."

"Oh, as to that," Evelyn blushed a little. "There was a used book seller who would lend out books for a penny so long as they were returned in good condition. Our evening amusement was to take turns reading aloud while we did mending or piece work and the like."

For a moment, Mayson envisioned a very young Evelyn reading aloud to a cluster of boys and girls who hung on her every word.

"We loved to take turns, and would sometimes act out the fairy tales," she was continuing to speak. "We had no idea how fortunate we were. It was simply the way things were supposed to be," she ended simply.

"It sounds wonderful," Mayson said a little wistfully. "I was an only child, and my... childhood home was not a happy one. My mother died while I was quite young, and my father was never quite the same afterward. I used to slip away and... visit the cook I told you about."

"How fortunate that you had somewhere that you could feel safe," she

said. "And how well that turned out for you, learning a skill and all. Did he also teach you your letters?"

"Alas, no. I had a different teacher for that. It is a wonder that I did not come to hate books, for he firmly believed that lessons should be beaten into a child. I think it speaks well for the written word that I found it too fascinating to ignore."

"What sorts of books do you enjoy?" Evelyn asked.

"Oh, all sorts," Mayson replied. "I am especially fond of improving books and in my line of work I read a great many that are intended for the ladies of the household."

"Can you give me an example?" Evelyn asked. "Perhaps I might like to read them, too."

"Well," he said, "I am currently perusing the *Frugal Housewife*."

"Really?" she commented, with some interest. "That is rather new, is it not?"

"It is," he replied, pleased by her interest. "It was published not long ago. I find that it has many useful things for kitchens in general, and I appreciate the recipes that are included. Indeed, some of them have been quite beneficial for Her Grace."

"Oh, yes, she does like the little treats that you make for her. They make something special for her at bedtime. I have noticed that evening is difficult for her. She misses the late Duke."

Evelyn looked out across the stream, her profile turned towards Mayson. As he watched, he saw her blink twice as if clearing something from her eyes, but when she turned back to him she smiled warmly and said, "We always miss those who have gone before, but it is our duty to keep on and take care of the living. I am so grateful to Her Grace for taking me on. This is a pleasant position for me."

"I have also found it to be pleasant working here," Mayson replied. "Her Grace is a gracious employer."

"She is such a such a dear," Evelyn agreed. "It is really quite touching

to see how she dotes on the Duke and how much she misses his father.”

“Even after the contretemps in the hallway following that little instruction session?” Mayson raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, well,” Evelyn tipped her head from one side to the other and gave a little laugh, “I had hoped just to wait on table that day. But His Grace insisted that I sit with them. The Duchess was quite fixed on the idea that she needed to spice up his relationship with his intended.”

“Are they at loggerheads, then?” asked Mayson.

“I would not say so much at loggerheads,” Evelyn mused, “as quite indifferent to each other. It is a shame, really. The marriage was arranged by his father while they were in infancy, practically. It is perfectly clear that they are ill-suited to each other. Either one would make a perfectly fine person to be united with someone else.”

“Now that is a shame,” Mayson said. “I have noted, however, that it is frequently customary among the peerage for loveless contracts to be taken up for the sake of land, power, and position.”

“I suppose I was fortunate,” Evelyn spoke slowly, as if considering every word. “My marriage, however brief, was for love.”

“Have you ever thought of marrying again?” Mayson asked.

“It is a little soon,” Evelyn replied, “but I suppose not impossible. I would hope to wed for love again, should it come my way. I do not think that John would want me to live alone forever, but he is due a decent time of mourning.”

“To be sure,” Mayson replied, uncertain whether he should feel chagrined or perhaps a little hopeful. After all, she had not said that she would not marry again. “How long do you think would be a respectful time?” he asked.

“A year is traditional,” she commented a bit absently, again looking out over the water. “It has been a little over six months and I am only in half mourning now.”

"I see," Mayson commented as he busied himself with organizing the bread and butter. "Would you care for some more?" he offered.

"Oh, dear, I do not think I could eat another crumb. This is all been so delicious. You are an amazing cook. Have you ever thought of opening your own business?"

"Why, I hardly know," Mayson considered it with a faraway look on his face. "I hadn't really thought on it, but I suppose that would be a logical summation of all my learning and exploring of cookery." It was now his turn to stare out across the water with an inscrutable expression. "I have simply been so busy learning how to be a cook for a household, I hadn't thought on it."

"So you said," Evelyn laughed a little at his disjointed answer. "I did not mean to disparage your current career choice. I hope you are not offended."

"You have not disturbed me in the least," Mayson said, turning his gaze full upon her. "In fact, you have given me food for thought. Evelyn, have you ever thought of perhaps relocating? Starting over somewhere new?"

"I can't say that I have," she replied, "but I suppose it is a possibility. Did you have somewhere in mind?"

"Oh, there are so many possibilities," he said. "You know, one of the things that I do love is reading travel logs. Her Grace has been kind enough to share a few of the late Duke's collection with me. On a lending basis, you understand."

"Indeed, I do understand. She is so very generous, and so delighted when anyone takes an interest in anything to do with the late Duke."

"Among the travel logs, there is an account of some of the early explorers of New South Wales."

"Is there?"

"Yes. Oh, such strange and marvelous creatures are described, you have no idea! Do you know there is one that sits up on its hind legs like a giant jackrabbit and hops about, but it carries its young in a pouch upon its belly?"

"I had no idea," Evelyn's eyes shone with interest. "Do tell me more. What else was in the travel log that you read?"

"Well, let me think. I believe there are people who wear almost no clothing and dress their hair with mud. Or perhaps that was the account of Borneo? Or maybe Africa."

"I would think that would be very uncomfortable," Evelyn commented.

"Well, one would believe that, but I suppose they might think some of our ways very uncomfortable."

"I guess that might be," Evelyn agreed. "There was a missionary who spoke at my parents' church once who described some inhabitants of deepest Africa who go about in that sort of dress."

Mayson nodded. "There was a book written by one of the great hunters who went down and collected heads and so on. One of the late Duke's uncles, I believe it was, went to Africa to hunt."

"The world is very large place, isn't it?" Evelyn commented.

"It is," Mayson agreed. "When you are out of mourning, perhaps we could talk about travel a little more."

Evelyn looked down at her hands, a little smile playing about her lips. "Why, I think perhaps we could," she said. "But for now," she glanced at the angle of the sun, "I think we might need to be getting back. This has been so very pleasant, Mayson. Thank you much for this lovely feast, and for this beautiful afternoon on the water. I cannot think when I have been happier or more greatly amused."

"Thank you," Mayson said, "for spending this time with me. I so rarely get to talk about books and other places around the world. This has been a great pleasure." He stood, stretched out his hands and assisted her with getting to her feet.

Her small hands were warm in his, strong and lightly calloused. She did not pull away immediately

They smiled at one another, and in harmonious accord, began packing

up the picnic things. And as happily as two children, swinging the picnic basket between them, they set off back up toward the house. As they walked, great thunder clouds built up in the sky above them and the first few drops of rain fell upon them. Evelyn picked up her skirts with one hand, and laughing they ran up the path. They arrived at the kitchen door just ahead of a torrential downpour.

“We must do this again,” Evelyn said. “Next time, it will be my treat.”

“Your wish is my command,” Mayson replied. “I will be happy to do this as often as you will allow.”

For a moment he allowed himself to dream, as he had not allowed himself for several years.

Chapter 13

Evelyn accepted a tall stack of laundry from Mrs. Smith, the laundress. As she did so, two of the upstairs maids came in chattering to each other. Molly Sue, the maid who had been there the longest, said to Betty, the newest maid, “Did you see those handbills?”

“What handbills?” Betty inquired absently, as she wrestled a large laundry basket over to the rest of the soiled household linens.

“The ones that are posted all over town, and on the main message post in the center of the square,” Molly Sue replied.

“Oh. I’ve not been to town,” the new maid replied. “I haven’t even had my third half day yet, nor my quarterly pay, so’s I’ve been just resting up in my room.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Molly Sue remarked. “I’m so sorry. I forgot. Of course you haven’t been to town, but you can go on your next half-day after we get our quarterlies, and see the sights.”

“I hear it’s not much of a town anyway,” Betty shrugged off the suggestion that she was missing out on something. “Just a village, really.”

“I guess that is true,” the older maid admitted, “but it’s our village and it has everything that we really need. There’s a notions shop, a milliner, a greengrocer, a butcher, and a bakery where they make the best sweet rolls. There is even a little newsstand that sells books sometimes.”

At this, Evelyn turned her full attention to the chattering maids. “Yes, books,” Molly Sue said in reply to her questioning look. “I guess you and the Duchess don’t have enough books to read.”

"Oh, the Duchess and I have plenty of books to read. It is just that sometimes I would like books of my own to read just for my quiet time alone."

"Is she terribly hard to work for?" Molly Sue asked. "The last companion said she was extremely particular."

"Not really," Evelyn said. "In fact, in many ways she's very sweet, very kind. You just have to understand her. Older people do have their particular ways. She has an amazing sense of humor, and says some of the most astonishing things. I rather like her. She reminds me of a neighbor we had when I was a child."

"Well, that's a miracle and a wonder," Molly Sue said. "I guess that means you might be staying for a while."

"I hope to," Evelyn replied. "But what were you talking about just now?"

Molly Sue frowned for a moment, as if try to remember what they had been talking about. "Oh, those handbills."

"Yes. You said they were all over town."

"So they are," Molly Sue commented. "They are all about Mr. Rutley from over at Hillsworth posting a reward for anybody who heard, or seen about, his nephew."

"Has the nephew gone missing?" Evelyn inquired.

"Oh, yes," said Molly Sue. "Several years ago, really. They say that he went out fishing and all they found of him was his hat and his broken fishing pole on the bank of the millstream. It was in full spate that day, so they think maybe he fell in and got washed away, but nobody ever found his body."

"How very strange," Evelyn said. "Did they not make a search at the time?"

"Oh, yes, of course they did. They made a huge search, with dogs and everything. But they still didn't find him. Some people think that maybe Mr. Rutley did away with him so's he could get the estate."

"That's certainly a chilling thought," Evelyn said. "What do you think happened?"

"I really have no idea," Molly Sue said offhandedly. "That was before I hired on here. I was still living at home, which is up on the other side of London. Then my mamma took me to the hiring agency to look for a position, and, well, I've been here ever since."

"Do you like working for the Duchess?" Evelyn asked.

"I guess I like it well enough," Molly Sue said. "I never worked anywhere else, so I don't really know, but I'm not unhappy working here."

"That's a blessing," Betty said. "I was very unhappy where I was working before. I went to the agency and asked to be placed somewhere else, 'cause the youngest son kept cornering us. And how do you say, 'Excuse me, Mr. Youngest Son, I'm not interested,' 'cause you don't dare smack his face for bothering you. Now, that'll get you turned off in a hurry with no references. One of the girls did, cause..."

"That does sound like a miserable experience," Evelyn cut in.

"Indeed, it does," Molly Sue agreed. "I've heard that that happened in some of the big houses but nothing like that ever happened here. Well, maybe a little bit."

"What do you mean, maybe a little bit?" Evelyn asked.

"Well the companion before you, she was somehow connected to the gentry, some kind of a daughter of a younger daughter, something like that. She thought she was better than all the rest of us, so when the Duke came over to have dinner with his mother, she'd get all dressed up in her best clothes and make sure that her bosom was showing just a little bit more than was proper. It didn't take the Duchess long to show her the door."

"Oh dear," Evelyn said, "Perhaps that explains..." and then she caught herself before she could say anything she might regret.

Mrs. Smith cut in. "You had all best hope that Mrs. Henshaw doesn't hear you gossiping when you should be working. It will be dusting the attics for you for sure if you keep that up for she does not like idle

chatter. Mrs. Swinton, was there anything else you needed from the laundry? Molly Sue, you've been told about gossiping before and no matter how many handbills are posted up in town you have no need to be talking about the Duchess or about the neighbors. Get along with all of you now, I have work to do, even if you don't."

As she walked away, Evelyn could not help but wonder why the handbills would be so important. Perhaps it was because the late Duke had been so interested in Hillsworth. Perhaps that made it of interest to everyone, or perhaps it was the mystery about the nephew's disappearance.

When Evelyn entered the Duchess' room she found Her Grace leafing through a stack of papers. Some of them were handbills and broadsheets, as well as a newspaper or two.

"Here, my dear," said the Duchess, "could you read these out for me? The print is baffling to my eyes today."

"Of course," Evelyn said. "I would be glad to. Where would you like to start?"

"Why don't you start with the handbills?" the Duchess said. "I always ask the footman who does the weekly purchasing to pick up the latest ones so that I will know what's going on in the neighborhood."

Evelyn obligingly picked up the stack of handbills and began reading them out. "Lost: Two piglets last seen foraging in local wood."

The Duchess laughed. "That would be Mr. Jenkins. He always lets his pigs run wild. My guess is that the foxes got them."

"Are there a great many foxes nearby?" Evelyn asked.

"There used to be a great many," the Duchess said, "But during my father's time we hosted fox hunts and that thinned them out. Of course, there is no telling what has occurred of late. My son does not care for hunting."

"Does he not?" Evelyn commented. "I suppose he has other interests."

"As nearly as I can tell," the Duchess replied candidly, "his primary

interests are his neckcloths, the fit of his coats, and, of late, he has evinced a desire for a new carriage.”

“Is that a disappointment to you, Your Grace?”

“Not entirely. He should take pride in his appearance. How else can one tell a Duke from a laborer? But I could wish that he focused his attention a little more on politics and what is going on in the world. Read on, Mrs. Swinton. Let us find out what else is going on in our small neighborhood.”

Evelyn picked up another handbill. “Reward for all kinds of snakes,” she read. ‘Garter snakes, puffers, adders, all kinds of snakes. The more deadly the snake, the greater the reward.’ That doesn’t sound like very much fun,” Evelyn commented.

Her Grace shook her head. “Indeed not,” she said. “I cannot imagine why anyone would be collecting snakes.”

“The fellow seems to be some sort of scientist,” Evelyn commented, picking up another handbill.

“Perhaps this would be of greater interest to you, Your Grace,” said Evelyn. “This seems to be a handbill posted by your neighbor, Mr. Rutley.”

“What in the world is he up to now?” the Duchess exclaimed.

“Reward,” Evelyn read, “5,000 pounds for word of The Earl of Hillsworth, 10,000 for his return. Tell him his estate misses him.”

“Well, indeed,” the Duchess chuckled, “after the boy has been missing for more than five years. Now he's looking for his nephew. I suppose he is getting tired of living on the proceeds from the estate and would like to get his hands on the principle.”

“Does this happen often?” Evelyn asked.

“No, but it does happen now and again that an heir goes missing. Frequently foul play has been afoot, but I suppose that Leroy Rutley is tired of living in poverty. It would not surprise me if he was helping to collect snakes.”

Evelyn laughed and reached for another handbill. "Oh my goodness," she said, "The strange things one does learn in the world."

Evelyn ruffled through the pleas for the return of missing livestock, suggestions for winter woolens, and similar items, looking for something that might be of more interest to the Duchess. "Here is a news broadsheet," she said. "Oh my, the village is getting a new constable."

"Are we indeed?" the Duchess looked interested. "Well, we should have him to dinner. Please take a letter, Mrs. Swinton."

Evelyn obligingly got out the writing things and quickly took down an invitation to dinner, addressed it to the constable's office in the village, and sealed it with the Duchess' own seal.

"Send that out with the post, my dear," the Duchess said. "It will be good to have a new face at dinner. Now if you would kindly also invite dear Blanche and her parents, as well as my son, we should have a pleasant meal."

Chapter 14

Darrius sat at the table wishing he was nearly anywhere else.

His mother looked pleased with herself, having not only managed to obtain the attendance of the new constable, but also that of the local magistrate and his wife.

As usual, Darrius sat at his mother's left, while the new constable sat at her right. Next to the constable was Mrs. Swinton, while to Darrius' left was Blanche. To Blanche's left sat her father, then her mother. On the opposite side of the table, the magistrate sat next to Mrs. Swinton, and his wife sat on the other side of him.

It was not, he thought, a poorly balanced table, but the presence of such plebeian locals rubbed at him. Still, he supposed, it was a way to become acquainted with the young constable. His mother certainly could not go down to the village and strike up a conversation with him as she might have done in her younger days.

"So kind of you all to come," his mother was saying, "We are very dull here with so few visitors."

Mrs. Clark, the magistrate's wife, said, "How can you say so? It is so beautiful here. Surely you must find many things to amuse yourself."

"I will admit," said the Duchess, "that since Mrs. Swinton has been my companion, it has been a great deal livelier. She has found many things to amuse me. We have been reading through George's collection of old travel logs."

"Oh," Mrs. Clark looked a little blank. "I would not have thought that would be very entertaining."

"I find it so," the Duchess said equably, "especially when Mrs. Swinton does such a divine job of connecting the old events with happenings

as we read them from the newspaper.”

“Oh,” said the magistrate, “I suspect that would be entertaining, to say nothing of instructive. Perhaps you should give the young constable the benefit of your observations.”

“I am sure,” Mrs. Swinton observed, “that our small doings would be of little interest to Constable Morris.”

“But we are grateful,” the Duchess added, “that the constable has taken time out of his busy schedule to dine with us tonight.”

“It is my pleasure,” Constable Morris said. “I had no idea that the position came with visiting privileges.”

“It is certainly unusual,” Lady Carletane observed.

“Nonetheless, it is supremely thoughtful,” Lord Carletane observed.

“Well,” said Magistrate Clark, “it is to be hoped that this is not a matter of currying favor.”

“No such thing,” the Duchess protested. “I am sure that it is difficult for a young person to move to a new area where he knows no one. By offering our hospitality we make it a little easier for this nice young gentleman.”

At this point they were interrupted by the servants bringing in the soup course. A fine aroma of chicken flavored with some unidentified spice arose from the bowls. The young constable waited until his table companions picked up their spoons, then copied their selection.

He has no idea even of which spoon to use, Darius thought to himself. Whatever was my mother thinking?

However, the Duchess seemed quite pleased with herself and beamed upon all the company with equal joviality.

“Mrs. Swinton and I,” the Duchess said, picking up the conversation where they had left off, “are matching the handbills with old legends and stories from the neighborhood. Do you recall when the young Earl over at Hillsworth disappeared?”

“Ah, yes,” the magistrate said. “That is still on our books as an unsolved case. He quite vanished, leaving only his hat and a broken fishing rod. The uncle is left in charge of the estate.

“Dear me,” said Lady Carletane, “Why do you suppose he is looking for his nephew now?”

Lord Carletane clicked his tongue at his wife. “My dear,” he said, “that comes perilously close to talking business at the dinner table.”

“Well,” said Lady Carletane, “I didn’t bring it up.”

The Duchess chuckled, a throaty genuine laugh. “No indeed. I brought it up. But you are right, Lord Carletane, it is very much like talking business at the dinner table. How rude of me! What would you like to talk about?”

“Well, for one,” said Lord Carletane, “I would like to know how your cook comes up with these lovely broths. This is such a simple dish, and yet it is delicious.”

There were murmurs of assent all around the table and spoons were busily employed dipping up the golden-colored liquid.

In short order, the servants took away the empty bowls, and brought in the meat and vegetable course. In country fashion, they were placed on the table and passed around, rather than serving as a full seven-course meal.

It was a simple meal that night. This late in June, a large butchering was not advisable, so the meat offering was a pair of plump hens flanked by a mound of fluffy dumplings.

The magistrate took a large bite of dumpling and hummed his approval. “Mmm,” he said. “Just the right amount of sage and something else I can’t quite identify.”

“Our cook is a master hand with the spice jar,” the Duchess said. “I have given up asking him what is in each dish but simply let him surprise me with the delicious selections.”

“Very wise,” said Lady Carletane. “I can quite see why you would not

want to be continuously asking what is in each dish, especially when the results are this good.”

“Indeed,” said the Duchess, “it is much better simply to enjoy it.”

However, Miss Notley simply sat looking at the dumplings. She did not even attempt to taste them.

“Is there a problem?” Darius asked politely.

“No, no,” said Miss Notley. “I’m sure it is quite delicious but my stomach is upset. I’m afraid I cannot eat a single bite.”

“Try it,” Darrius urged. “The cook is a genius. However, if this is not something that you can eat, we will send down to the kitchen to ask if he will prepare something different for you.”

“Oh, no,” said Miss Notley in a faint voice. “I could not possibly put him to such trouble. I will simply sit here and watch the rest of you enjoying your meal.”

“Nonsense,” said the Duchess. We can certainly send for something that you can eat. Can you not at least have a bit of the chicken?”

“It has come to my awareness,” said Miss Notley, “That meat comes from living creatures that have feelings, relatives, and babies. I simply cannot eat anything that comes from flesh.”

Darius looked at her, brows raised in astonishment. “When did this come about? For you were enjoying roast beef only a week or so ago.”

“I found a book,” she said “And it spoke of the lives of the animals that we have on our farms.”

“Very well,” said Darrius. Trying to maintain civility he beckoned to the butler. “Please, can you find something that Miss Notley can eat?”

The butler bent his head in a proper bow, and said, “I will speak with the cook, Your Grace.” And he immediately left the room.

“Now I have put the servants to extra trouble,” Blanche said. “I am so very sorry, Darrius.”

“Not to worry, my dear,” said the magistrate sententiously, “That is what servants are to do. They are to wait upon our pleasure.”

Blanche looked across the table at Mrs. Swinton. “Mrs. Swinton, how do you feel about this?”

Mrs. Swinton, who had been caught with a mouthful of dumpling, chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, and said, “Working in the great houses provides many people with positions that will earn money. Without that work they would be in want. I do not think that finding a vegetable dish for you, Miss Notley, will be outside our cook’s abilities, nor will he be upset by finding something suitable for you to eat.”

“There, you see?” Darrius said, not unkindly. “We cannot have you sitting at table starving, Blanche. Just think how uncomfortable it would be for the rest of us.”

“And of course it would be pleasant for me, would it not?” she retorted hotly.

“I should not think so,” Darius said, “nor would we wish for you to have that experience.”

“Then why did you have such a dish made?” Blanche asked, in a high-pitched whine that put Darrius’ teeth on edge.

“Begging your pardon,” he protested. “I am terribly afraid I had nothing to do with the menu.”

Blanche looked at him slightly askance. “But you know about my delicate digestion.”

“To be sure Blanche, we are all aware of your delicate digestion,” his voice had now developed a definite edge.

“And of course that is my fault,” Blanche said.

“Not at all,” Darrius commented, “I cannot see that it is a fault sort of thing. No one holds you at blame for having a delicate digestion.”

Nonetheless, Blanche gave him a sideways look that did not bode well

for private conversations at a later time. In a few moments, Wilson, the butler, came back with a plate of sliced neeps, a slice of cooked cabbage, and a mound of sliced carrot medallions.

“The cook begs your pardon, Miss Notley, and hopes that these offerings will be more to your taste.” the butler said, presenting them to her.

Blanche sighed dramatically. “The carrots will be good,” she said. “I cannot abide neeps, and cabbage would surely upset my stomach.”

Lady Carletane clicked her tongue at her daughter. “Blanche, you are being rude.”

“I am sorry, Mother, but I simply cannot eat these things,” Blanche said in some distress.

Mrs. Swinton spoke up, “If you will give me a list of the things that you like, Miss Notley, I will share them with our cook. He is a most accommodating fellow and I’m sure would be glad to prepare the kinds of foods that you enjoy.”

“I could not put him to so much trouble,” Blanche protested.

“I am fairly certain,” Darrius put in, “that he would find that much less trouble than trying to find something at the last moment that you might possibly eat. Really, Blanche, we are aware of your delicate digestion, but Mrs. Swinton has presented you with an excellent solution.”

“You always take her side,” Blanche complained. “Is this how it will be when we are married?”

“When we are married,” Darius said calmly, although inside he was seething, “you will be able to select the menu and confer with the cook yourself.”

“I had not thought of that,” said Blanche, “but of course you will have to have the things you want to eat.”

“Yes,” Darius said, forcing his tone to be pleasant. “to be sure, I *will* want things that I can eat.”

“And you will be eating animal flesh in front of me,” she said.

“Unless we are going to be taking our meals separately,” Darius pointed out, “I will most assuredly be eating animal flesh in front of you.”

Miss Notley looked at her plate for a moment, pushing the little carrot medallions about upon it. “No one understands my sensibility,” she said. “I shall simply waste away from having improper food.”

No one at table knew quite what to say to that. It certainly put a damper upon the other diners’ spirits. Darius cut a slice off the chicken and offered it to his mother who accepted it graciously. The young constable on the other side imitated his host by offering a similar slice to Mrs. Swinton.

Lord Carletane, who was heartily enjoying a large piece of chicken and a dumpling, said with some severity, “Blanche, that is quite enough.”

Blanche looked at her father, but said no more.

Lady Carletane rummaged in her reticule and pulled out a paper-wrapped pastille and handed it to Blanche.

Blanche accepted it and nibbled at the edge of it.

“I simply do not know what we shall do,” Lady Carletane said. “I have made an appointment with a famous London physician to try to discover the cause of her delicate appetite.”

“A very practical solution,” the Duchess said. “This certainly is not something you want to have continuing on. It is to be hoped he can discover the cause.”

Darius thought to himself, *Indeed, no, we do not want this going on, and I tremble to think what my life will be like when I am married to this woman. Why could she not be more amiable, like Mrs. Swinton? She is so immature in her approach to everything, like a spoiled girl who has not gotten her own way and is not the center of attention.*

Something of the sort must have been running through Blanche’s mind

as well, for she threw down her napkin, and stood up.

“I am not a child,” she declared. “Nor am I feeble-minded. Right now, the mere appearance of that bird upon the table is making me feel bilious. If anyone wants me, I will be in the library. Mother, Father, you can collect me there when you are ready to go home. Pray, excuse me!” She left the room at a near run.

“Dear me,” the Duchess said. “I am sure no one meant to upset her so.”

“Please, continue your dinner,” Darius said. “I will attend her. Perhaps something simple delivered to the library will help.”

With that, he left in pursuit of his one hope of keeping his creditors at bay.

Chapter 15

Blanche stood by the window in the library. She twisted a handkerchief in her hands and looked deeply distressed.

“Blanche?” Darius made her name into a question. “What is really wrong?”

“I wish I knew,” Blanche replied. “I am following all my physician’s orders, yet I continue to feel pale. I am always a little sad. What is wrong with me, Darius? Why do you not love me?”

This question took Darius aback. Somehow he had never considered that Blanche might have feelings of any sort. She was simply a destination, a thing he had to do in the future.

Love her? People married for convenience, for advantage, but rarely for love.

“I am sorry, Blanche. It had never occurred to me that you desired love. It seemed to me that you were focused on your gowns, on jewels, pretty flowers, and holding the perfect conversation that is all about nothing.”

“Of course that’s how I seem,” she replied. “That is what they teach us in finishing school. Featherhead, feather-light, sweet and charming, with not so much as a solid thought between our ears. But I do have them, Darius. I do have solid thoughts, and I do feel ill, and no one believes me.”

Darius stared at her for a moment. “Just how ill do you feel, Blanche?”

“Oh not unto death, just weary, as if I have no life, no energy.”

"That is a terrible feeling," he said, recognizing some of his own apprehensions and discomfort in her statement. "Perhaps we should try a different physician. Not all of them ascribe to the same school of thought."

"Do you think it would help?" she asked

"I think it would not hurt to ask," he said. "Is there a reason why you have not?"

"Physicians are very expensive," Blanche replied. "My mother and father have already spent a great deal on treatments and experimental medicines. I do not know what to do. I do not want to beggar my parents, so that when I marry they will have nothing left on which to live. The dowry is set aside and cannot be touched or changed."

Darius felt the blood drain from his face. "Your parents are in financial difficulty."

"And have been for some time," Blanche replied. "That is why we have not hastened this marriage. Although the dowry cannot be touched, the proceeds from it constitute a large part of their yearly income. My father made some bad investments, and although he is slowly recouping, he has a good way to go before he and my mother will be secure."

"Blanche, I had no idea," Darius said. "Why did you not tell me this sooner?"

Blanche gave him a thin, rather wan smile. "Darius, do you think that I do not know that our pending nuptials are holding off your creditors?"

This was a side of Blanche that Darius had not seen before. He paused, wordless.

"Do you think I have not seen how you look at your mother's latest companion? She is everything that I am not. She is pretty, has a lovely figure, is well-spoken and well-read."

"You are well-read," Darius put in trying to put as good a face on this situation as he could.

"I am," she replied, "but perhaps not as well-read as Mrs. Swinton. You will make her your mistress, will you not?"

"I'm not sure she will allow it," Darius said, not denying the charge. "She has told me rather pointedly that she is not interested in such an arrangement."

"Yet you keep trying," Blanche said bitterly, "and you keep pushing me away."

Darius said, "If you were honest with me more often, as you are being now, I would be less inclined to push you away. I believe that this is the first frank conversation we have had since we were ten years of age."

"As I recall," Blanche said, "I told you, at that point, that you were horrible and I never wanted to marry. And you told me that it did not matter, girls did as they were told."

"I did say we were honest," Darrius remarked. "Then it was not long after that our fathers announced that they had arranged this. It is supposed to conjoin your estate and mine, and create a solid situation for both of us."

"What shall we do now?" Blanche asked.

"First of all, we're going to see about this not feeling well, because Blanche, I remember you as a very vigorous young lady quite capable of holding her own at shuttlecock, including smacking me with a racket.."

"That was before our fathers announced that we would be wed," Blanche pointed out. "I wasn't allowed to hit you for being annoying after that."

Darrius gave a little snort of laughter. "See the physician. Try to feel better. Let us have a few more honest conversations before we decide what we are going to do."

"I am not at all sure that it will help," Blanche said, "but I will do as you suggest and begin with trying a different physician."

"I'm glad to hear that," Darius replied, "for whether we wed or not, we were childhood playmates and I hold you in some regard. But although I am not angry with you necessarily, on the other hand I will be very honest. I am not looking forward to being married to you."

"Nor I to you," she retorted.

"There is a simple solution," he said. "You can cry off. Ladies can, you know, without damaging your reputation. But if I cry off, then people will wonder why."

"And do you not think that they will wonder why if I cry off, Darius? It might be a long time before you can get another engagement if we break this one."

"Better that than a lifetime of misery," Darius said. "I have seen the arranged marriages where nobody is happy and I do not want that for either of us."

"Thank you for that," Blanche said. "You are right. Being honest does help."

"I regret that the dinner was not to your liking. Our cook is quite good at tempting my mother's appetite. Perhaps if we sent down, he could manage something that your system could tolerate. What has tasted good recently?"

Blanche thought about that for a moment. "Honestly, the soup that we had for dinner tasted good. And yes, I know it was chicken. But I think that, and perhaps a little new bread, I could keep down."

Darrius tugged on the embroidered bell pull that was beside the library door.

When the butler came, Darrius asked, "Could we have a little more of the soup that was served as the first course for Miss Notley? She is not feeling well and the main course is not appetizing to her."

"Of course. I would be glad to speak with the cook."

In just a few minutes one of the maids brought in a tray that held a bowl of broth, several slices of new bread, some sweet butter, and a

cup of golden milk tea.

The butler and Darius quickly cleared off one of the library tables making room for the tray.

“You should go back to your guests,” Blanche said. “I will do well enough here.”

“Are you quite certain?” Darrius looked anxious.

“Yes,” she replied, “This actually looks good. I think I might have a little appetite, especially if I can sit quietly and eat without people staring at me.”

Darius glanced at her in astonishment. This was a side of Blanche that he had not seen before. “Very well,” he said. “I will be glad to leave you to your repast. The butler will check in on you from time to time. Or should I have one of the maids sit with you?”

“The butler will be fine,” Blanch said. “I have had enough of people looking at me for today.”

“Very well,” Darius said. “I will go see to my guests.”

As he left the room, his mind was in a turmoil.

Have I wronged Blanche by not paying more attention to her? But she is right. She is a pale imitation of a woman when compared to Mrs. Swinton.

But all I can offer a woman like Mrs. Swinton, the daughter of shopkeepers, unapologetically common, is to be my mistress. Nor did she seem to favor my attentions.

Darius found his own digestion roiling as he stood, irresolute, in the hall. But he was a gentleman, and he had his duties to his guests, his mother, and his estate. He straightened his waistcoat, repositioned the pin on his cravat, and selected a slightly worried but confident expression to display upon his face.

Thus armored, he went back into the dining room.

Chapter 16

“*I*s there anything more beautiful than a cloudless afternoon in June?” Evelyn asked. It had been her turn to provide the picnic luncheon, but Mayson had been unable to refrain from adding a few extra touches to the bread, cheese, and new apples that she had purchased. He had rounded out their feast with some broken meats left from the noon meal and a bottle of fresh-pressed cider.

“Perhaps one or two things,” Mayson teased gently, while looking at her meaningfully.

“Oh, you,” Evelyn waved a hand dismissively at him. She looked down at the neatly carved wooden bowl that held bread, cheese, and several bits of thin sliced meat. It had been an unexpected gift from Mayson, carved by his own hands.

Mayson watched her as if she was the most beautiful creature in all the world. Evelyn tried not to squirm or say something flippant under his gaze. “Could I ask you something?”

“You can ask. I will not promise to answer.” Evelyn looked up at him.

“If, theoretically speaking, a gentleman was to ask a lovely widow if she might wed him when her period of mourning was up, what do you think the lady might say?”

Evelyn looked out across the pretty meadow where they had chosen to picnic on this day. “Well, theoretically speaking, I would say that if he had the patience to wait attentively for a respectful amount of time, that there would be a good chance that the widow might say yes if she liked him.” She then busied herself with arranging the items in the pretty wooden bowl.

“Would it be rude of him to ask before the period of mourning was

up?”

“Perhaps not, if he made it clear that he was willing to wait.” Evelyn let a smile tip up the corners of her mouth, but she turned her eyes to the contents of the bowl.

Mayson warmed to his topic. “Evelyn, do you think you could see yourself as my wife in a year’s time? I will not tease you about it if you say no.”

“I think, Mayson, that you are a very pleasant fellow. In due time, I might say yes. Can you wait a little while for your answer? I would like for us both to be sure.”

“I will wait for you until the moon turns blue and the stars fall out of the sky. I would even wait for you to the ends of time.”

Evelyn smiled. “I’ll not ask you to wait quite that long. But perhaps you might ask me again at the end of summer. I suspect that my answer might be yes, and we could be wed in spring a year from now.”

Mayson did a backflip off the picnic blanket, and followed that up with a series of handsprings. He came back, sat down beside her and captured one of her hands in his. “You have made me an incredibly happy man,” he said.

Evelyn patted the back of his hand with her free one, and smiled with genuine pleasure and amusement. “Goodness! I am glad that you did not ask while we were in the kitchen or one of the drawing rooms.”

“Perhaps a generally good thing,” Mayson said. “Handsprings tend to play the... er... wreak havoc with the china.”

“Indeed they do,” Evelyn replied. “Mayson, I’m not sure I’ve seen anyone who can do the things that you do.”

“As I told you, I learned a great deal from the cook, and I trained with a gentleman from the Far East. I learned a great deal from him.”

“That I might believe. But Mayson, you are not like most of the servants, and you are nothing like any other cook I have ever met.”

Mayson sighed. "I suppose that since I have asked and you have said there is a good chance that you might say yes, that I should tell you who I really am."

"I am listening," Evelyn said. "Are you about to tell me that you are a long, lost prince or a convicted criminal?"

"Not quite," Mayson replied. "But I am practicing a small deception upon the world. Have you heard the maids talk about the ghost of Hillsworth?"

Evelyn laughed. "Oh, I have heard the story. He goes about the hills, and on nights when the moon is full he raises up his hand to display the crescent moon birthmark on his wrist."

Mayson paused a moment, as if afraid of what she might say next. Then he took a deep breath and said, "Good. I will not have too much explaining to do." He carefully peeled back the wrist cuff of the thin leather fingerless gloves he always wore. There, on the inside of his wrist was a red birthmark in the shape of a crescent moon.

Evelyn looked at in surprise, then lifted her eyes to his. "You...?"

"I am Mayson Rutley, the Earl of Tolware."

Evelyn stared at him, round-eyed with shock. "But... I thought..."

"That the Earl of Tolware was dead? That was the impression I wanted to give everyone. My uncle was trying in various subtle ways to get me killed, or poisoned, or to create an accident."

"Your uncle... but isn't he still taking care of Tolware?"

"Yes, if you could call it that."

"But how did you end up here? Is any of what you have told me true?" Evelyn would have withdrawn her hand, but he held it tightly in both of his, as if he were drowning and it was a lifeline.

"I really did go to a military school and do a tour of duty in France," Mayson said, gazing earnestly into her eyes. "That school had a nasty reputation for deaths by hazing or by mistreatment. I was supposed to

end my days there. I got out of it by volunteering to go to France.”

“But did you not know that there would be fighting there?”

“Absolutely I knew. But as a ‘graduate’ of that prestigious school, I went as an officer, not a conscript. Which, if I claimed my rank, would have been true anyway.”

“So you had a batman because...”

“Because I am an Earl, and because I was an officer.”

“But the cooking part?”

“Also true. You need to understand, Evelyn, that we went with minimal provisions and were expected to ‘requisition’ food from available supplies. The school was famous for turning out soldiers who could ‘live off the land’ for weeks.”

“But it was not like that, was it?” Evelyn watched his face. Usually so expressive, he held it studiously blank.

“No, it was not like that. Living off the land meant stealing from farms and peasant folk who had little enough to live on as it was, especially after two armies had rolled back and forth across their farms. My men were starving, many of them had dysentery. It was beyond bearing. So I set some rabbit traps, happened to find a scrawny hen that had escaped from somewhere, and I boiled grain, added the pitiful meat scraps, some herbs I found in a hedgerow, and my fellows and I, all twelve of us, had a decent meal.”

“But it didn’t stop there, did it?” Evelyn asked, her eyes shining with comprehension.

“No, it did not. When our tent neighbors got a whiff of good food cooking, and learned how we did it, they brought their meager supplies to combine with ours. After that, it was not too long before I was made quartermaster and head cook, with a reputation for turning a handful of grain and a bone into edible food. From then on, I saw absolutely no part of the fighting unless the scent of cooking brought the enemy to raid our camp.”

“Did that happen often?” Evelyn asked, fascinated by his story in spite of her better judgement

“Once or twice,” Mayson replied. “But less often as my reputation as a cook grew. You’d be amazed how interested men can become in protecting their source of good food.”

Evelyn laughed at that, as he had meant for her to do. There was no point in telling her about the days when boiled grain was all he had to offer his men, or the days when the relentless rain put out the fires or when it was not safe to have a fire, and their grain was soaked instead of boiled.

But then her face sobered. “But how did you learn to cook? I always pictured you as a starving waif that some kindly cook took under his wing.”

“You would not be too far from wrong there. My father was obsessed with the idea of turning Hillsworth into a place of classical beauty where his neighbors could congregate day or night for revels and frolics. My mother grew ill of a fever not long before I was born, so I had a wet-nurse and was essentially raised by the servants.”

“I’ve heard of that happening in great houses,” Evelyn nodded.

“Father had a temper that knew no bounds. When things did not go his way, he took it out on his younger brother and on me. Oddly enough, Uncle Leroy worshipped the ground he walked on, often remarking that he should have been my father’s heir instead of me.”

“Why not you?”

“I was not an easy child, I fear. I was often sickly, hated hunting, and grew pale at the sight of blood. Our cook, who had several nieces and nephews, probably saved my life. He let me hide in the kitchen when Father was in one of his moods. This went on long enough, that when I asked if I could help like the kitchen boys were doing, he would give me small chores, such as rolling and cutting dough. When he found that I had a genuine interest in cooking and a knack for it, he taught me. All on the sly, of course. Father would have had a hysterical fit if he had realized.”

“What happened to your father?”

“He became ill. The physicians could not seem to discover why. They bled him nearly dry, dosed him with all sorts of concoctions, yet he slowly grew weaker. Toward the end, he lost his appetite, and I would go to the kitchen and cook special foods to tempt him into eating. But it was all for nothing. I was four-and-ten then.”

“So it was your uncle who sent you away to school?”

“Yes. He declared that he had no idea how to care for a youth, and sent me off to the military boarding school. It was quite famous, after all, and had a reputation for turning out successful officers.”

“But also a different sort of reputation, I would guess,” Evelyn put in.

“Yes. A *very* different reputation. It was where the peerage sent their failures, unwanted younger sons, and children born on the wrong side of the blanket who were too well-placed to be ignored. A right lot of young hellions, for the most part.”

“How did you survive there?”

Mayson laughed. “The kitchen again. This time, it was Zhao Bai Li who was my refuge and teacher. He was the school’s cook, and he ruled the kitchen with an iron fist. It was after I saw him calmly send one of my nastier classmates on his way that I asked if he would teach me.”

“And he taught you about golden milk.”

“Yes, that and many other healing recipes. There were several of us who found Mr. Zhao’s kitchen to be a refuge.”

“Zhao was his surname?”

“Yes. The Chinese write their names differently from us.”

“How did he come to be the school’s cook?”

“I don’t know. He would never say. I suspect that he was an exile of some sort but he taught those of us whom he deemed worthy how to survive in that school.”

“And you learned more than about cooking.”

“Yes, indeed I did. I suppose he is still there, cooking and teaching the ‘worthy ones’ to survive.”

“That is an amazing tale,” Evelyn said softly. “But why... “

“I like living,” Mayson said wryly. “I was still too young to take control of the estate when I came home from the war, since my father had set the age of inheritance at thirty. I believe he had intended to still be alive when I had my thirtieth birthday.”

“Can you prove who you are?” Evelyn asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“How old are you now?”

“Three-and-thirty.”

“Why not go claim your inheritance? Why let your uncle, who clearly is not doing a good job of managing the estate, run through everything?”

“First of all, he cannot run through everything. Unless he can prove that I am dead or two more years pass without my appearance, he cannot assume the title or touch the principle.”

“That is an odd way of setting things up,” Evelyn said. “If shopkeepers set the inheritance of their shops in such a way, soon there would be no cobblers or weavers.”

“I think my father had some inkling of the kind of person his younger brother had become. Or perhaps he was setting it up in that way so that he could keep control of everything longer.”

“But you would not inherit until after his death, would you?”

“That is right. But he knew he was ill. He spent many hours mewed up with his solicitor shortly before his death.”

“Mayson,” Evelyn said, now holding his hand in both of hers, so that

their hands were clumped together, as if they were one fist.

“Yes, Evelyn?”

She felt a sick, churning lurch in her stomach, for she knew the consequence of her next words. An earl could never wed a shopkeeper’s daughter. Even so, she said what she believed to be true. “You should claim your inheritance. It is the talk of the entire countryside how your uncle is treating the people at Hillsworth. It is not fair to them to leave things as they are.”

“You might be right,” Mayson replied soberly. “But I do not think it will be easy.”

“Doing the right thing hardly ever is,” Evelyn said.

Mayson nodded soberly. “I know,” he said.

“Evelyn?”

“Yes, Mayson?”

“I would still like to ask you to marry me, and I will, come summer’s end, no matter what else happens.”

Evelyn gently disengaged her hands. “You say that now, Mayson, and I believe that you mean it to be true. But you might find that things are vastly different once you take up your title.”

Mayson looked into her eyes soberly. “Evelyn, do you think you could love me?”

“It is a little too soon to say for sure, Mayson, but perhaps I could. But your duty must come first.”

Shyly, tentatively, Mayson brushed a tendril of hair away from her face. “I am mindful of my duty, Mrs. Swinton, and of the need to give you time for your grief to run its course. But only one thing could possibly keep me from asking for your hand.”

“What is that?” Evelyn felt her stomach clench. Somehow this conversation had gotten completely out of hand.

“If you told me with all honesty and sincerity that you could never love me or that there was some other person living who had claimed your heart. I will always respect your wishes, but no power on earth will keep me from loving you.”

It took all of Evelyn’s resolve not to melt and say “yes” right then. But she understood how the world worked, and she would rather not have anything happen that they would both regret. Then, almost without her conscious volition she heard herself say, “Claim your inheritance. If you still feel the same way after you have come into your own, I am unlikely to say you nay.”

Mayson recaptured her hand, and kissed the tips of her fingers. “Everything I am, everything I have, and everything I ever will have, I will gladly lay at your feet, my lady Evelyn.”

“I’m not a lady,” she protested softly.

“You are my lady,” he said. “And you always will be.”

The sun brought sparkles to the water, sparkles almost as bright as the little stars that danced in her heart. Even though she knew better, Evelyn could not bring herself to say no.

Chapter 17

Leroy Rutley closed the door behind his visitor. "You came about the advertisement," he stated.

Yes," his visitor replied. "My principle is interested in the bounty you are offering. What is this person to you that you offer such a high reward?"

Mr. Rutley replied, "He is my nephew. He has been missing for some time and as it stands now the estate require a great deal of repair and maintenance, all of which must be done out of the proceeds from rent and sales of stock and crops. I cannot touch the principle or even the interest, yet the servants, the farmhands, and all the other workers must be paid."

"I quite understand," said his visitor. "My principle has a similar problem and it is for that reason that he is interested in the bounty."

"Have you some reason," asked Mr. Rutley, "to believe that you know the location of my nephew?"

"Indeed, I do. I have heard stories and perhaps a name. What kind of proof do you need of his location or his demise?"

"I suppose his body would do, dead or alive. Alive perhaps would be better? Or dead. It is somewhat a matter of indifference to me."

"That is a most amusing attitude," said the visitor. "I gather that you were not in line for the inheritance."

"Oh dear me, no. No, I was the second son, always the second son. It was dinned into my awareness from the beginning that my older brother was the head of the house and that his son should inherit after him. No one was planning on an illness, a miserable wasting illness."

The visitor barked a short laugh. "I don't suppose you had any influence on this illness."

"No," Mr. Rutley said. "Believe it or not, I was actually rather fond of my brother. It was his spoiled brat of a son that I could not stand. Always talking back, always knowing everything, always good at everything, even though he was often sickly, and so polite. He was so good it was beyond bearing."

"What of your own family?" his visitor asked.

"My family? My brother married my only love."

"It would seem to me, then," said the visitor, "That you would have a vested interest in the caring for her child."

"One would think that, wouldn't you? But the mewling little beast was the cause of her death."

"I see," said the visitor. "That is, indeed, quite interesting. I can see how you might feel some animosity toward the child, but surely you cannot really blame him for his mother's death?"

"I suppose it's unreasonable, but love is not reasonable, nor desire for revenge."

"Were you responsible for your brother's death?"

"No, no. No such thing. Nor will I be responsible for my nephew's death."

The visitor looked down at his shoes, then looked out the window. "A curious attitude, My Lord."

"Oh, I am no Lord," said Mr. Rutley. "As you might guess, that is part of the issue."

"Oh, yes, I quite understand that is part of the issue," said his visitor.

"But enough of this," said Mr. Rutley. "Can you assist me?"

"I believe I can," his visitor said. "I shall see if I can drive your

problem away or simply dispose of it. Of course there is that matter of proof. I am assuming that a body that has clearly come to harm might be proof."

"One does not like to say so," protested Mr. Rutley, "but in truth, it would solve a great deal."

"I'll see to it," said his visitor. "You'll be hearing from me."

Chapter 18

Mayson shook his head over the sorry state of the Sunday roast. Mr. Sparks had forgotten to keep it turned, and it was blackened on one side, but raw on the other.

How could he have forgotten to turn the roast? Did not his nose inform him?

Mayson sighed. There was no help for it. While it was not an enjoyable thought, the fellow would have to go.

But if he went, who would he get in his place?

Jemmy! Of course, Jemmy would be perfect. The young man was already showing an interest in cooking, knew his ways, and knew the kitchen.

"Jemmy?" Mayson called over the hubbub of morning breakfast preparations.

"Yessir?" Jemmy hastened toward him, wiping perspiration from his face with his sleeve.

"Here," Mayson said, handing him a piece of rough toweling, "Use that. Don't wipe your face on your uniform."

"Sorry, Mr. Rudge," Jemmy said. "Did you need me for something?"

"Yes, indeed," Mayson said. "Let us go out on the stoop where it is a little cooler and we can hear ourselves think."

"Can we do that right now, Mr. Rudge?" Jemmy looked worried.

"Let me worry about that, Jemmy. Everything is simmering, so I

believe we can, for just a few minutes.”

The two of them exited the kitchen by the garden door, leaving behind the clatter of the maids chattering to each other as they loaded the breakfast trays. The food was cooked and on the central table, so they should require little or no help. In addition, other than the daily soup which Mayson had just stirred, there was nothing to boil over or scorch.

“How can I help, Mr. Rudge?” Jemmy asked, as they stepped out into the fresh air. Since it was nearly July now, the day was already beginning to warm up nicely. Birds twittered in the trees. There were voices of mowers at work, and the mumbles and grunts of the milch cows being turned out to pasture behind the main barn.

Mayson took a moment to survey the scene, and to breathe in air untainted by cooking fires. Then he said, “Jemmy, how would you like to be undercook?”

“Would I ever! Mr. Rudge, do you mean it?”

“I do, Jemmy. You have been doing a good job with baking the bread. I believe you can learn to do more exacting tasks.”

“But, what about Mr. Sparks?”

“That is between me and Mr. Sparks, Jemmy. Lesson one about being a cook: you must learn to manage people as well as food. You should also improve your manners.”

“I’ll do my very best, Mr. Rudge. I will listen and learn all you can tell me. This is just fine! Super fine! I can’t wait to tell me Mum.”

Mayson smiled at the young man. “You’ve earned it, Jemmy. I’m afraid for a few days it might mean doing two jobs until we can get a replacement for you.”

“I can do it,” Jemmy declared. “Oh, thank you, Mr. Rudge! When do I start?”

“Today, if you can manage to wash pots and keep an eye on the soup and the roast.”

“That won’t be no problem at all,” Jemmy declared. “I’ve been mostly...” His speech skidded to a halt as he realized what he had been about to say.

“I know, Jemmy. That is why you are getting this chance. Now, we had best get back in there before the soup boils over or sticks. You will be in charge for a brief time while I go speak with the Duchess.”

“Do not worry, Mr. Rudge. I will see to it.”

Mayson smiled as he listened to the boy tidy up his speech to meet the expectations of his new role. Jemmy would do fine. Unfortunately, Mayson was not so sure of Mr. Sparks.

Mr. Sparks was an older man, nudging the edges of elderly. Of late, he had been taking to his “rheumatiz” medicine a little more heartily than was probably good for him. He had also grown dangerously vague. He did not want to just turn the old man off, but neither could he continue to employ him in the kitchen.

Mayson was concerned about intruding on the Duchess’ breakfast, but he knew that he needed to do something about Mr. Sparks right away.

When Evelyn came pattering down the stairs, he had an excellent breakfast already loaded on two trays. This would give a good excuse for his going upstairs with her.

“Oh my,” Evelyn said, “that is a lot of food for the Duchess and me. Are we expecting company for breakfast?”

“Not precisely,” Mayson said. “I need to speak with the Duchess. Is she having a good morning?”

“She is,” Evelyn said cautiously. “Why do I get the feeling that she will shortly not be having as good a morning?”

“I need to remove Mr. Sparks as undercook.”

“Goodness! He has been here forever.”

“Yes, he has. And that, I fear, is part of the problem. He is getting on in years and is not as diligent as one could wish. I am hoping that we

can pension him off. He has been talking about going to live with his daughter.”

“That seems like a good solution,” Evelyn said. “I’m fairly certain the Duchess will approve it. She is aware of some of the adjustments you have had to make to the dinners.”

Mayson helped Evelyn carry dishes upstairs. Although it was not customary, he had done this often enough recently that it was unlikely to excite comment.

Evelyn entered the Duchess’ drawing room first, saying, “Mr. Rudge has helped carry up your breakfast, and he has a matter he would like to discuss with you.”

“Is my cap on straight?” he heard the Duchess ask. “Make sure my shawl is settled correctly and send him in. Do you think he has time to sit down with us for a cup of tea?”

There were sounds of quick bustling. No doubt, Evelyn setting the Duchess to rights before inviting a gentleman into her private drawing room. In just a few minutes, Evelyn ushered Mayson into the room.

“Set the tray right there,” she said. “Your Grace, shall I pour you a cup?”

“Indeed,” said the Duchess, “go right ahead. And pour a cup for Mr. Rudge. He looks as if he has weighty matters on his mind.”

“Indeed, Your Grace, I do,” Mayson said. “I am so sorry to bring to you a difficulty so early in the morning, but I feel that the sooner it is dealt with the better.”

“Well, well,” said the Duchess, “Let us each have a sip of tea and a bite of these excellent muffins, then we shall get to it.”

So for the next few minutes they did nothing but eat and drink while the tension stretched and grew.

“Now then,” the Duchess said, “what is the problem?”

“It is Mr. Sparks,” Mayson replied.

“What has that old reprobate done now?” the Duchess asked, with no little exasperation.

“He burned the roast,” Mayson said.

“He burned the roast. But surely that is not a tragedy or an event of great immensity.”

“Perhaps not, Your Grace,” Mayson agreed, “but in the process he filled the kitchen with smoke and nearly set his own hat on fire. Nor is this the first time for such an event.”

“Nearly set his hat on fire! That is a matter of greater import. So the poor old soul is becoming a danger to himself.”

“And to the entire kitchen and household, I fear, Your Grace. I understand that it is because he is old, and his rheumatic joints pain him.”

“Oh goodness, I certainly do understand about rheumatism and pains,” the Duchess said. “So Mr. Rudge, what do you propose for Mr. Sparks?”

“It is my hope, Your Grace that we can pension him off. He has been talking about going to live with his daughter. Do you know anything about her? Would she take good care of him?”

“Well, I do not know her personally, but I believe that the butler does. In fact, I think she is his niece. Perhaps we should summon the butler.”

“Oh dear,” said Mayson, suddenly realizing that he might have skipped a step in the household hierarchy, “Perhaps I should have spoken with the butler first.”

“Perhaps, but no matter. We will speak with him now,” the Duchess said. “Between the four of us, I am sure we can find a good solution for Mr. Sparks.”

When the butler came in, he looked very grave. But he did not say anything until the Duchess asked, “What do you know of Mr. Sparks?”

“He came with me from your father's household,” Wilson replied, “and he has given good service for many years. He had hoped to be promoted to head cook but Mr. Rudge came with such excellent recommendations that he was hired instead. It was probably a good thing.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?” the Duchess asked.

“Frankly, Your Grace, of late, Mr. Sparks’ wits have begun to wander. My nephew’s wife, his daughter, has been trying to get him to move in with her. But he does not wish to be a burden.”

“Has he nothing saved from his pay?” The Duchess looked a little scandalized.

“Sadly, no. He started drinking brandy for his rheumatism and that was well enough at first. But now he has a nip whenever he is feeling lonely or upset or when his rheumatism is hurting him. Brandy is not part of his household allowance, and even though he buys the cheapest kind from the village innkeeper, he has spent most of what he had put by.”

“Then it would seem,” the Duchess said, “that it is not a good idea to simply give him a pension.”

“No, probably not,” the butler said. “But I believe you could pay his daughter for the keeping of him and that would serve very well. She will ration out his brandy or perhaps give him a little pint money in case he wants to spend an evening at the inn. Then he will no longer be trying to set our kitchen on fire. But who will you get in his place, Mr. Rudge?”

“I was thinking of promoting Jemmy. He is steady and he has been here several months now. He shows an interest in cooking and I believe would be quite pleased with a promotion. Although he has not said so, I think he might be courting one of the village girls.”

“Is that indeed so, Mr. Rudge?” The butler lifted his eyebrows.

“It is my belief. I have no confirmation of that,” Mayson said.

“Well, well, it is always good when we can hire our local people,” the butler ruminated. “And if he is courting one of the ladies from the

village, it will give him incentive to stay with us. Are you willing to train him?"

"I would not have suggested it if I were not," Mayson replied.

"Then all we need is to speak with Mr. Sparks to set this plan forward," the Duchess said. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, gentlemen. I believe we have a plan that will be good for everyone. Will you make the arrangements?" she directed this latter to Wilson.

"I will," the butler said, "and willingly. More than once I or one of the maids have had to rescue him from the coals after Mr. Rudge has gone to bed. It will be a relief not to continue keeping watch over him."

Mayson bowed to the Duchess and gave a nod to Wilson. "Thank you both for your kindness," he said. "Now, if I might be excused, I should get back to the kitchen. I have a potboy to promote and he has no one to take his place."

"I will send to the agency at once," the Duchess said. "Do not trouble yourself on that account, Mr. Rudge."

"Then I will leave that in your capable hands, Your Grace," Mayson said. Bowing once more, he let himself out, leaving the butler, the Duchess, and Evelyn to sort out the arrangements for Mr. Sparks.

There was one thing left to do now, and that was to inform Mr. Sparks that Jemmy would take his place. The thought filled him with no little trepidation. In addition, there was a little niggling thought—who would cook for the Duchess if he took up his title? If he did, would he even live to see the end of summer?

Chapter 19

Evelyn smiled happily at Mayson. The mid-July sunshine shone down upon her new bonnet and she was feeling quite carefree. The picnic basket swung between them as they walked toward their usual spot beneath the old willow.

“So how is Jemmy doing as under cook?” she asked.

“He is doing quite well,” Mayson replied. “I am very pleased with his work.”

“Is he indeed courting one of the young ladies from the village?”

“I believe so. The shopkeeper’s daughter, if I’m not mistaken.”

“She is round and rosy, very sweet tempered and pretty,” Evelyn commented. “I hope they make each other very happy.”

“I am doing my best to make that completely possible,” Mayson said. “It has been my observation that while money might not be everything, a steady, reliable sum goes a long way toward making family life much more...” He paused, as if rummaging through a mental attic for the right word.

“Pleasant,” Evelyn put in. “I know what you’re talking about, Mayson. I’ve seen the families where there was not enough income to feed everyone and somebody had to go completely without, or else everyone went a little bit hungry. Money won’t buy happiness, but it will buy things that people need to feel better.”

“That is exactly what I wanted to say,” Mayson said. “But what of Mr. Sparks, have you heard from him? I have not seen him or heard word since he left the Dowager House. He was no little upset with me at the

time.”

“The butler says that he is adjusting nicely. He spends his time either playing with the baby or sleeping in front of the fire. His daughter is glad to have him there. She’s also glad of the small stipend that the Duchess settled on her for taking care of the old man.”

“I’m glad things are working out for him,” Mayson said. “We had all grown very worried about him, and I was concerned about what he was doing to the food. That last poor roast was so scorched that I had to trim away nearly half of it, and not even the dogs in the kennel would eat the burned parts.”

“That is worrisome. I know that the Duchess has a reliable income, but even so, waste can lead to want.”

“I’ve seen that, too,” Mayson said. “My father, for example, with his desire to make his estate beautiful, frequently placed the household at a disadvantage because he wanted a new bit of marble or he wanted a fountain. In some ways, it is no wonder that my uncle wanted to have an end to his wastrel ways.”

“But that hardly seems like good grounds for the way your uncle treated you.”

Mayson shrugged. “I was in his way and now he is in my way. I’m in a quandary, Evelyn. I like the work I am doing. I feel I have purpose. Yet in order to take up this other obligation, I am going to have to quit. It feels as if I am shirking my duty.”

“Perhaps you need not right away,” Evelyn said. “There is Jemmy to train, and you will need funds to bribe officials and pay fees for necessary paperwork.”

“True enough,” Mayson said, taking the picnic basket and setting it in the middle of the platform beneath the willow. “I have every reason to want to stay here right now.” He looked at her meaningfully. “But will you always want to be a companion to the Duchess?”

“Perhaps not always,” Evelyn said. “But she is kindly, and I do enjoy being with her and giving her company. I’m not quite sure what I want to do. So much of my time and attention was taken up with John, and before that with taking care of my brothers and sisters.”

“Did you go directly from your parents’ home into marriage?” Mayson asked.

“I did. That is not to say I did not know about work. As I had explained to you before, we all had to work. There were too many of us for mother and father working alone to earn enough to feed us. But once the younger ones were old enough to help keep the house, I worked in Father’s shop. That is how I met John.”

She looked out across the wide stream. It was low now, and Mayson had lit the smudges at the corners of the picnic platform. Smoke drifted from them, making the bits of green moss growing at the edges and eddies of the water appear hazy, perhaps even a little unreal. The inevitable midges danced in little patterns over the water. She turned back to Mayson. “I don’t believe I have ever considered what I want. There was always someone who needed me.”

“Then perhaps it is time that you should,” Mayson said. “I would be glad to help you realize your dreams.”

“And I, yours,” Evelyn replied. “I wonder if you should apply to the Duke for his assistance in your situation?”

“Considering that his father seemed to turn an avaricious eye toward Hillsworth, I am not certain that would be a good idea,” Mayson replied. “I know of a magistrate who was an officer when I was in France, and I believe I shall go to him for help.”

“That seems reasonable,” Evelyn said. “It is always good to have friends in high places.”

“I would not say that he was so highly placed,” Mayson replied. “But perhaps advantageously placed. His advice will be valuable.”

Evelyn digested that, once again looking out across the water.

“Are you hungry?” Mayson asked. “We have not even unpacked the picnic basket.”

“So we have not,” Evelyn said. “What surprises have you packed this time?”

"I have been too busy training Jemmy to spend much time on our picnic," Mayson replied. "But I think I have something that you will enjoy."

He refused Evelyn's help as he began to unpack the basket. He had even not allowed Evelyn to assist with supplying it this time, saying that it was his turn.

There was the usual bread and cheese, and broken meats which he had no longer any compunction about using, since it would have been part of their normal meal. But he carefully pulled out a lovely pie from which there arose the aroma of fresh baked pears. He held it before her, as if it were a set of crown jewels.

"Oh, my," Evelyn said. "I was not so very hungry, but now I am."

"You must eat your main course first, Mrs. Swinton," Mayson chided her, teasingly.

"Yes, Mr. Rudge," she said, in just as light a tone, "I will eat my bread and cheese before I have pie, but I promise you I shall not be filling up on it."

For several minutes they ate and drank in convivial silence.

"I almost wish," Evelyn said, "that we were contemplating shipping out to the colonies."

"Do you desire living rough?" Mayson asked. "I can certainly do it, if that is what you wish."

"Not precisely that," she said. "More that I would very much like to have something of my own, to be able to make plans and changes and contrive."

"I have noticed you contrive a great deal," Mayson said, cutting and dishing up a generous slice of pie for her. "Much to the Duchess' benefit."

She took the pie, their fingers brushing lightly against each other as the plate exchanged hands. She nibbled thoughtfully at a flaky bit of pie crust, thinking hard before replying. "Yes, but that is not the same

as contriving something of your own.”

“I understand,” Mayson said sympathetically. “I frequently felt that way when I was living in my father’s house.”

“If you could live anywhere,” Evelyn asked, “Where would you like to live?”

“That is a very good question. In many ways I would be delighted to ship out to the colonies with you. I have often wondered, however, if we’re doing the people who already live there any favors.”

“An interesting consideration,” Evelyn replied thoughtfully, “and I’m sure I do not know the answer.”

“How fortunate it is,” Mayson smiled at her as he spoke, “that we do not have to solve the problems of the world today.”

“No, indeed,” Evelyn said. “We have only to enjoy this luscious pie you have made and the warm sunshine. I cannot believe you have managed to keep the cider chilled.”

“It is easy enough,” Mayson said. “There is a spring house next to the kitchen. A towel soaked in the cold water and wrapped around the jug will keep it chilled for some time. It is one reason I am able to make such lovely dishes for the Duchess. It keeps the cream, milk, and cheese well chilled. That is why we can have whipping cream and special icings.”

“I had wondered,” Evelyn commented. “We had such a hard time when we were living in London to keep things cool in the summer. London does get so very awfully hot.”

“And smells bad besides,” Mayson added. “Such a ferment of animal droppings and other things out in the streets.”

“That is, I believe,” Evelyn said, “why the peerage all take to the countryside during the summer. It is said to be much healthier.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Mayson said, “but I can assure you that it certainly smells better. I had a very difficult time getting used to that part of living at the prestigious school I attended.”

“It was in London?”

“Oh, yes. You do not think that my uncle wanted me anywhere near the estate, do you? Out of sight, out of mind, or at least that was what he hoped.”

“Do you think anyone still working at the estate would recognize you?”

“Probably not. It has been a good many years since I disappeared, and even more since the staff that my father hired was there.”

Evelyn frowned a moment, then looked up at him. “Is it difficult being so near and not visiting?”

“Very much so,” Mayson said, “but if I go back and I am recognized then I must claim Hillsworth, whether I am ready or not.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Evelyn said. She did not say what was in her heart. If Mayson went back to Hillsworth, she would have to give him up. He would need a wife who would add to his status, not a poor shopkeeper’s daughter. Still, they had this day, with the sun on the water, and the old willow giving them shade. She did not want to give that up.

For a few minutes Evelyn looked out across the water, watching its slow glide between its banks. What did she want? John had been a wonderful husband but he was gone now. She liked Mayson very much but could not see a future for them. While it was a wonderful fantasy that they should run away to the colonies or to New South Wales, realistically the best thing for Hillsworth and for Mayson, was for him to go home and take up his inheritance now that he was well past being of age.

“You are very quiet,” Mayson said. “Are you thinking deep thoughts?”

“No,” Evelyn lied. “I am thinking that you are the best cook this estate has ever had and your absence will be felt.”

“It is good to know that I will be missed, but I am not gone yet.” Mayson watched her closely, a slight frown on his brow. He reached over, and gently took one of her hands in his.

“Quite so,” Evelyn said, tightening her fingers around his. “Is it not a beautiful afternoon?”

“It is,” Mayson agreed. Neither of them spoke of the trepidation that was in their hearts. Nor did they notice the listener who slipped away from behind the veiling fronds of weeping willow, the rustling masked by the sound of the water.

Chapter 20

Miss Notley, Lady Carletane, and the Duchess were pouring over pattern sketches. Evelyn was kept busy fetching pattern books, sketching paper, and measurement charts.

“This pattern is quite fetching,” the Duchess said. “You are so slim, Blanche, that we would scarcely need to lace you at all to achieve this shape.”

“Indeed,” Lady Carletane said. “We would need to add some padding to make the train and the bust fit correctly.”

“I think I would rather have something that required less adjustment,” Blanche protested.

“It is lovely,” Evelyn put in, “but perhaps the ruffles would be a little overpowering for Miss Notley. Here is a gown with elegant and simple lines that could easily be converted to an evening gown after the wedding.”

Blanche tittered nervously. “Trust the shopkeeper’s daughter to think of the economics of a wedding gown,” she said, almost a little nastily. “That would make it highly unlikely that the gown should be passed down to the next generation.”

Lady Carletane took this to mean that she should have had an heirloom gown to pass down to her daughter. “I am so sorry dear,” she said, “But moths got in the attic, and the silk is so old that there is no help or no hope of refurbishing it.”

“That is quite all right, Mother,” Blanche said, “for I do not believe that your wedding gown would have fit me anyway.”

"I fear not," her mother said. "You take after your Aunt Grace, who was thin as a rail from the day she was born, until the day she was laid in her coffin."

"Since she was only seven-and-ten when she passed away, this is hardly comforting, Mother," Blanche remarked acidly.

"Dear me," Lady Carletane protested, "I am sure I was not referring to her longevity. Rather, I was referring to how small she was all of her life compared to the rest of us."

Blanche sighed. Evelyn looked at her with sympathy, for she guessed what might be going through the young lady's mind. If her Aunt Grace, who had been extremely thin, had passed away at age seven-and-ten, then it was hardly a good prognosis for the length of Blanche's life.

"Your Grace," Evelyn asked tentatively, "have you thought of asking your physician to look at Blanche? Since her current one does not seem to be doing her a great deal of good?"

"What an exceptional idea," the Duchess said. "My dear Blanche, he is to call on me tomorrow. Why do you not visit me at the same time, and we can see what he might have to say?"

"Would he not charge for having an extra person to attend?" Blanche asked.

"Oh piffle," the Duchess said. "If he does, I shall pay for it. It is my idea, after all, and it would please me. My dear, it distresses me to see how poorly you feel. You are always lovely, but you used to have a great deal more energy."

"I cannot argue with that last," Blanche said. "Very well, I will indeed plan to visit you tomorrow, Your Grace. Although I do not enjoy being poked and prodded, perhaps he will have some insight."

"Are you quite sure, my dear?" asked Lady Carletane. "Your physician is quite renowned."

"Even renowned physicians now and then make a mistake," the Duchess pontificated. "To err is human and to forgive is divine. Should he have made a mistake we shall forgive him, mostly."

“Mostly, Your Grace?” Evelyn asked lightly.

“Mostly. Because the physician is responsible for the lives of others. When his treatment is not efficacious, he should take it upon himself to make changes. Yes, he should!” The Duchess now looked quite fierce.

“I will own I cannot argue with that,” Lady Carletane said. “Therefore, my daughter and I will wait upon you tomorrow when your physician is in attendance.”

“That will be lovely, my dears,” the Duchess said. “I can think of nothing better. I shall look forward to it. He will be here shortly before tea, so we can have a light repast afterwards to sustain us through whatever nuggets of wisdom he shall impart. I have always found that having a physician in attendance makes me extremely hungry.”

“That would be desirable,” Blanche said, “for of late I have not felt hungry at all. Weak, miserable, and unhappy, but not hungry. It seems no matter how little I eat, I still have no appetite.”

“With that out of the way,” the Duchess said, “I do believe that Evelyn’s suggestion of a gown with simple lines might just suit you.”

Lady Carletane looked at the pattern indicated. “It is extremely plain,” she said.

“Indeed, it is,” Evelyn replied. “Which means that if it were made up in a rich silk with just the barest hint of a color that would complement Miss Notley’s complexion, it would make her look lovely without overwhelming her slight figure. With a light veil, she would look ethereal, like an angel descended from on high.”

“You could be right,” Lady Carletane said, looking again at the pattern. “It would give me genuine pleasure to see my daughter looking lovely.”

“Shall we order the silk, then?” the Duchess asked.

Lady Carletane considered it for a moment. “I have not quite the funds this quarter,” she said. “Perhaps by early August, my pin money allowance will cover it.”

“Nonsense,” said the Duchess. “I shall order it and it will be an early wedding gift. I have a little put back for just such an occasion.”

“Are you quite sure, Your Grace?” Lady Carletane fretted.

“I am certain,” the Duchess reassured her. “We need to get these young people married and the bride cannot approach the altar in some old rag.”

Evelyn ducked her head to hide a smile and busied herself with putting the pattern books away after marking the indicated pattern. The attitude she displayed was so typical of the Duchess, as was her kindness. But it would never do to let Her Grace see that she was amused.

Evelyn was just standing up and turning around when Miss Notley made a sort of harsh little cry and crumpled up in a heap on the floor.

“Good heavens,” gasped the Duchess. “I do not think we should wait until tomorrow. Mrs. Swinton, send for one of the footmen and have him go for Dr. Alton right away.”

Evelyn was already tugging on the embroidered bellpull. “Certainly, Your Grace.”

When the footman arrived, he was sent straightaway for the physician. In the meanwhile, Mrs. Swinton and two of the maids lifted Miss Notley and laid her on the daybed that stood near the Duchess’ comfortable chair.

“We must undo her stays,” Lady Carletane said. “She thinks that she is too fat, and she always has her maid do them up tightly.”

Evelyn carefully undid the lacings on the sides of Miss Notley’s gown. Then she loosened the laces on her corset. Sure enough, when the tight lacings were undone, Miss Notley took a deep breath.

“Here is my hartshorn,” the Duchess said. “Wave it under her nose. It is warranted to be stout enough to rouse the dead.” Evelyn dutifully waved the small bottle, which reeked of ammonia, under Miss Notley’s nose.

Miss Notley gasped and turned her face aside trying to escape the fumes. Evelyn pulled the bottle away and handed it back to the Duchess. "I believe she is coming round," she said.

When Dr. Alton arrived, he looked into Miss Notley's eyes, then held a sort of curved horn to her breast and listened to the narrow end of it. He tut-tutted, then he made some notes in a leather-bound notebook, and finally sat down on one of the spindly occasional chairs that were in the room.

"Tell me, Miss Notley," he asked gravely, "where do you get your face powder?"

"Why, I am not really sure," she replied. "My maid gets it for me."

"And your lip and cheek paint?" he asked.

"She gets that, too," Miss Notley said.

He pulled a long face. "Do you wear it often?"

"Well, yes. Daily," Miss Notley said. "If I am going out, a little kohl to outline my eyes."

"You had to loosen her stays, did you not?" he asked.

"To be sure, we did," said Lady Carletane. "She is a good girl and always keeps her corset tightly laced."

The physician looked as if he had eaten something sour. "Come here, Mrs. Swinton." She approached him obediently. "Now turn around. No, keep turning," he said, as she turned her back to him. "What do you see, ladies?"

The Duchess was the first to speak. "Well, she is a trifle plump," Her Grace commented.

"Not at all," said Dr. Alton. "She is a fine figure of a woman, neither too plump nor too lean. It is a grave mistake that many of our young ladies are making when they strive for a fourteen-inch waist, a fair complexion, rosy cheeks, and red lips. Fourteen inches is not at all natural." He frowned at Miss Notley.

“But I don’t have a fourteen-inch waist,” she protested. “It’s eighteen inches, nearly twenty if I do not lace tightly.” Distress showed plainly on her face.

“I do not doubt it at all,” he said. “But, my dear, you are going to have to turn loose some vanities if you wish to have good health. First, let us wash away the paint that is on your face so I can see your real complexion.”

“No, please no,” Miss Notley sounded dreadfully distressed.

“Yes,” said the physician. “Please, yes. Do you wish to live or not?”

“I do want to live,” Miss Notley said, “but I also wish to be beautiful.”

“You can,” the grizzled physician said. “But not by caking your face with this powder, and smearing your lips with carnelian. Finishing schools should teach their young ladies the chemical content of their make-up, but not one will own up to its being slow death.”

“How do you know that?” Miss Notley asked. “Without my paint, I shall be plain, ordinary.”

“Perhaps,” said Dr. Alton, “but I believe you will feel better.”

Shortly a maid brought in a basin of warm water and a face cloth. “If you will do the honors, please, Mrs. Swinton,” the physician asked.

Evelyn started to sponge the powder and paint away from Miss Notley’s face, but the powder was thickly caked, and did not readily yield to the water. “Perhaps a little oil to loosen it?” Evelyn suggested.

So it was that they sent down to the kitchen in a short while, and a small tub of new butter was sent up, along with a cup of buttermilk that Mayson suggested as a means to sooth Miss Notley’s skin. For some time, Evelyn alternated using the butter to remove the caked-on paint and using the warm water with a little soap to remove the butter residue, and a gentle rub with the buttermilk on irritated areas.

After a time, Miss Notley's natural face was revealed.

She looked younger without the powder and paint, and a little scared,

as if she was not sure what this unveiling would do to her.

“Why, you are quite lovely,” said the Duchess. “I had no idea that powder and paint could create so much trouble. I have no such problems because I gave up the bother some time ago, and Mrs. Swinton has never used any.”

“Does this mean,” Lady Carletane asked, “that I should also give up my powder and rouge?”

“It would be a blessing for your health,” the physician said. “It is little known but many of the paints and powders that are brought from the Orient are filled with poisons. So are some of those that are made in our local shops, as well. Has your physician also prescribed a tonic and perhaps eye drops?”

“Well, yes,” Miss Notley admitted.

“You must cease taking all those things and using the drops right away.”

“But my eyes will look little and piggy,” she protested.

“Better little and piggy than blind,” the physician intoned. “I have seen it far too often. A little belladonna in the eye and the pupil opens wide, making the ladies look lovely. But the eye is a gateway to more than the soul. It is a very sad thing, but I have seen more than one corpse brought in for dissection at the college where this was the cause of death.”

Lady Carletane gasped. “You cannot mean that!” she said.

“I am afraid I do,” he replied soberly. “Many of the London physicians believe that they can dose their patients with minute amounts of poison to make their system stronger, allowing it to build up an immunity. But it is rarely effective, and is more likely to carry the patient off sooner rather than later.”

Miss Notley sat silent, as if stricken dumb. Lady Carletane turned to the Duchess. “Surely he cannot mean that? This man is no better than a quack. I am taking my daughter home immediately.”

The Duchess shrugged. "I am sorry you feel that way, Lady Carletane. I am even sorrier for Blanche, who is suffering under your physician's regimen. I, on the other hand, have never felt so young in years."

"You! You scarcely move out of your chair," Lady Carletane folded in her lips to keep from saying more. She breathed hard once or twice through her nose, then turned to her daughter. "Come, Blanche. We are going home."

The Duchess looked horrified. "How can you simply ignore this physician's good advice?"

But Lady Carletane hustled her daughter out the door, with scarcely a backward glance.

The Duchess relaxed back against her cushions, looking exhausted and disappointed. "I never expected her to take it that way," she said.

"You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink," the physician said, sententiously.

The Duchess looked over at Evelyn. "I meant it for the very best. How could this go so wrong?"

"Lady Carletane is the one who took offense, Your Grace. But Blanche heard the message. Perhaps it will do some good."

The Duchess sighed. "Is use of this paint and powder truly that dangerous?" she asked the physician.

Dr. Alton sighed. "More than you can possibly know. If he has also prescribed something to make her skin look pale and fine, as well as drops to enlarge the pupils of her eyes, she could be in grave danger. She is your son's intended?"

"Yes," the Duchess said. "We were just looking over patterns for her wedding gown."

"Then mark my words, if he intends to have a living wife, he will do his very best to dissuade her from these practices lest he become a widower within months of being wed."

The Duchess looked stricken, and sank back upon her pillows. Evelyn took her hand and gently patted it. "The Duke will be here for tea today. We can mention it then."

"Yes, an excellent notion," the Duchess said, patting her ample chest, as if her hand was simulating the action of her heart. "Do send down to the kitchen, Mrs. Swinton. I feel the need of something restorative."

"I will go myself," Evelyn said, hoping that Dr. Alton would take the hint and step out in the hall with her.

"I shall take my leave," he said, gravely, and followed Evelyn into the hall.

"Is the Duchess in danger?" Evelyn asked immediately.

"It is more excitement than I would have recommended for her. I am deeply sorry to have caused Lady Carletane's reaction. I'm afraid diplomacy has never been one of my better skills."

"I can see that," Evelyn said with wry amusement. "What would you recommend for the Duchess?"

"An apology from the departed lady, but since that is unlikely to happen, a little sweet cider mulled with cinnamon. On no account should she have wine or brandy after such an upset. Indeed, she should not have it at all. If you can get her settled, a quiet afternoon listening to one of those travelogues she so enjoys."

When Evelyn returned to the room, she found the Duchess drying her eyes.

"Mr. Rudge has made a lovely mulled cider for you, Your Grace. When the Duke comes to visit, we shall be sure tell him what Dr. Alton said. Perhaps he can persuade Miss Notley where we cannot."

"I wish I had your faith in his powers of persuasion, my dear," the Duchess smiled wanly. "I love my son, but he is even less diplomatic than Dr. Alton. I appreciate his frank gruffness, but clearly Lady Carletane does not."

Evelyn plumped the Duchess' pillows and made her comfortable, then

persuaded her to select a favorite book to listen to. But as she read, Evelyn could not help but wonder what could make a woman slowly poison herself for beauty's sake.

Chapter 21

Mayson rubbed his hand over his face. This was the fifteenth applicant for potboy. All of them had good references and were eager to have the work. But none of them were likely to mesh with the Duchess' household.

The next candidate was one of the strangest men that Mayson had ever seen. The right side of his face was heavily scarred to such an extent that it was a wonder that he could see out of both eyes. He wore a heavy beard on the left side of his face but the right seemed to be incapable of growing hair. He walked with a pronounced limp. When Mayson could see him fully, he realized it was caused by his having a wooden peg instead of his right foot. He carried his right hand close to his body, as if it had been in a sling for a long time.

"Name's Pete," the fellow said. "Pete McElroy. Some calls me Pegleg Pete, which ain't no more'n fair."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. McElroy," Mayson said. "It looks as if you have seen some action on the front lines."

"Saw a bit," said Mr. McElroy. "Did my service down Africa way."

"I'm looking for a potboy," Mayson said. "There are some stringent physical requirements, such as lifting large pots and so on."

"I'd reckon if I can lift cannon balls and a firing rod, then I can lift a few pots."

"I do not mean to be rude," Mayson said, "but you are missing a leg and you are carrying your arm as if it was injured not long ago."

"Well, as to the leg," Mr. McElroy said, "I'm afraid that's permanent

like. But the arm is more temporary. I busted it about two months ago working in a warehouse. Got it caught twixt two barrels. I'm pretty well healed up. Saw your ad for a potboy and I figured that pots got to be easier than barrels."

Mayson laughed. "I suppose I can see your reasoning. Do you read?"

"Enough to get by. I can read a contract mostly, an' I can sign my own name."

"Can you figure?"

"There I do shine, mister. I didn't get your name. How should I address you?"

"You can call me Mr. Rudge," Mayson said. "I am the head cook." He nodded toward Jemmy. "You can call him Mr. Jemmy. He is the undercook, and I'll introduce you to the rest of the staff a little later on. I like your attitude, Mr. McElroy. I'm always willing to go a little out of my way to help someone who has served our country. I'll take you on as a trial and two weeks from now we will see how it has gone."

"Fair enough, Mr. Rudge. I promise you will not be sorry," Mr. McElroy said. "Now, if you'll just point me to that washing bench, I can get to work right away."

"Jemmy will take you out to the laundry room to pick up some uniforms, and he will show you the ropes. His promotion to undercook is new. You will be taking his former position."

"Fair enough," Mr. McElroy said. "I'll admit I wouldn't mind a minute or two to get tidied up. A man ought to look trim on the job."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. McElroy. Now Jemmy, if you will take him to the laundry room and get him squared away, I will begin to see to the rest of the dinner preparations."

Molly Sue ogled after Jemmy and Mr. McElroy. "Mr. Rudge, how's he gonna wash dishes? He's got one leg and one arm."

"We'll take him on trial, Molly Sue, and see how he does."

She looked at him with frank disbelief, then loaded up a tray and went off upstairs with it.

Was it that late already?

Then the tower bells from the village Chapel tolled three times. It was, indeed, tea time.

“Would you care for a spot of tea?” he asked Mr. McElroy as he returned in a crisp, white uniform.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he said. “My last meal was yesterday sometime. You might say that eating regular is a big part of my reason for applying here.”

“I can understand that,” Mayson replied. “I got my start as a cook because I had a knack for making half a hare and a bucket of oats turn into something that folks could stand to eat.”

“Is that right?” Mr. McElroy acknowledged. “Hunger do be a powerful push to get folks moving right along.”

“Sometimes,” Mayson replied. “However, that will not be your concern here. Jemmy and I will do most of the cooking while your job will be to wash the pots.”

“Fair enough,” said Mr. McElroy. “All I ask is a fair trial. This here arm should be better in a day or two. For now, I might need a little help hoistin’ the biggest pots.”

“If you are sure it will get better, that will be well enough. Now, how do you take your tea?”

“Anyways I can get it,” Mr. McElroy said, with a twinkle in his eye. “But if you have cream and sugar, I would admire havin’ it served up that a-way. Me mum used ter make it like that as a special treat.”

“Sugar and cream it is,” Mayson said, pouring for them both. “Here are some ham sandwiches, sweet biscuits, and fresh apples, if that suits your appetite.”

“Oh, Mr. Rudge! I will be your best friend forever. I have not seen

such a meal in I do not know when.”

So saying, Mr. McElroy fell to with excellent appetite. He ate quickly and efficiently, as if the food might get away if he did not consume it fast enough. For all that, he used good table manners, chewed with his mouth closed, sipped his tea properly, and made use of his napkin to smother the inevitable burp at the end of his repast.

“Now, if you will point me toward the washin’ bench, Mr. Rudge, I will get to work straight away,” Mr. McElroy said.

“Jemmy,” Mayson nodded toward the newly promoted under cook.

“Right this way, Mr. McElroy,” Jemmy said. “I’ll show you where everything is stored.”

“Do you really think he will do?” Jemmy asked when he returned.

“We shall see,” Mayson said. “In truth, I am not sure. But I would not turn away one who has served England to the best of his ability, and clearly given of his health. Help him with the biggest pots, if he asks, but otherwise let him be to do his work. Let me know if there is a problem.”

“I can do that,” Jemmy replied.

“Now then,” Mayson went on, “Let us see about dinner. We shall have a great many hungry people needing to be fed all too soon.”

The two of them then bent over the slate that detailed the evening menu, then separated to attend to their various portions of the preparations.

Mayson kept a wary eye upon Jemmy’s processes but could find no fault other than the young cook being a trifle slow. Time and custom would take care of that.

He was less sure of the wisdom of hiring on a man with one leg and an arm only recently healed, but he could not with good conscience turn him away.

If I established my claim on Hillsworth, would Jemmy and Mr. McElroy be

capable of cooking for the Duchess and her household?

He sighed. Complications at every turn. Doing the right thing was not always as easy as it seemed.

Chapter 22

Evelyn hurried down the steps to the kitchen. She could hear voices, which was unusual at this time of night. She knew that Mayson had hired a new potboy. And that he was the talk of the entire house.

“He’s so ugly,” Mollie Sue said.

And Betty, trying to impress Mollie Sue, added, “I don’t see how he’s going to wash pots since he’s only got one good arm.”

“I suppose,” Evelyn said, “that Mr. Rudge had good reasons for hiring him. You know that Mr. Rudge fought in the war against Napoleon. I suspect he has a soft spot for others who did the same.”

In spite of her staunch defense of Mayson’s actions, she was a little concerned herself, and now that she was coming to the kitchen for their usual late evening meal and conference she was surprised to discover that they were not going to be alone. Mayson sat at the table and nearby sat a rough-looking man with a ragged haircut, dressed in the kitchen scullery uniform. It looked odd on his burly form, for the uniform was designed for a stripling youth.

“Mrs. Swinton!” Mayson exclaimed. That was her cue that their conversation needed to be formal.

“How are you, Mr. Rudge?” she asked.

“I am doing well enough,” he replied. “Mrs. Swinton, I would like for you to meet Mr. McElroy. He will be our newest staff member and will take Jemmy’s place as potboy. Mr. McElroy, this is Mrs. Swinton, the Duchess’ companion. She often takes her last meal with me.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Swinton” Mr. McElroy said.

"I've heard a great deal about you," Evelyn replied.

"All good, I hope," said Mr. McElroy.

Evelyn did not tell him that the entire staff was speculating on how a one armed, one legged man could be a potboy.

"You are wondering how I am going to do this job," the fellow said.

"I am not wondering so much as the entire staff is curious," Evelyn replied. "They are sure that you have been offered this position because you were formerly a soldier."

"Near enough," Mr. McElroy said. "But I plan to pull my own weight. My hand will be better here in a week or two. It is a recent injury. The leg... Well, I've learned to manage."

"I see," Evelyn said, giving Mayson a sharp glance.

"It will be all right," Mayson said. "He has already done his share of the washing up, and a bit more besides."

"That is good to know," Evelyn said. "I'm sure that in a few days everyone will notice that the pots are getting scrubbed and that the kitchen is running smoothly."

"What have you been doing today?" Mayson asked conversationally.

"Miss Notley, her mother Lady Carletane, the Duchess, and I were working on designs for Miss Notley's wedding gown."

"Is it official, then?" Mayson asked. "Have they set a date?"

"I am not sure about that," Evelyn replied. "I do know that Miss Notley has an excellent eye for the garments that will suit her figure. The Duchess had to intervene to keep her mama, Lady Carletane, from dressing her in a plethora of lacy ruffles, which would not have suited her at all."

"I am glad to hear that all is proceeding amicably," Mayson commented. "We shall dine in company," he added, with a glance that seemed to convey an apology. "After which, Jemmy will show Mr.

McElroy to his bedchamber, and you and I can go over the menu for the Duchess for tomorrow. I saw that her physician called today.”

“He did, but not for Her Grace,” Evelyn observed, without going into the disastrous scene that followed his visit. “Still, I shall be glad to go over the menu, and point out the things she especially enjoyed.”

“So why was he here?” Jemmy asked, quite lost to the niceties of avoiding gossip.

Evelyn considered her answer a moment. “It was for Miss Notley. She had a fainting fit. The Duchess has been concerned about the young lady’s health for some time, and her own physician does not seem to be doing her any good.”

“I’ve heard about them Lunnon physicians,” Jemmy said sagely. Then, a thought seemed to strike him. “Do ya think she’s in the family way? My sisters all seemed to drop like poleaxed sheep when they was expecting.”

Evelyn laughed at his earnest expression. “No, no, Jemmy. I do not believe she would ignore social niceties to that extent. She and the Duke will be wed soon enough. I think it more likely that she over did herself during the Season and is finding it difficult to regain her stamina.”

“It is to be expected,” Mr. McElroy put in. “Stayin’ up past dawn, then sleepin’ till noon, and then up to have a round of visitin’ an’ dancin’. Work for the great houses in Lunnon town an you see it often. ‘Sides, you would not believe the things gentlewomen put on their faces an’ in their drinks, all in the name o’ bein’ beautiful.”

“Does it work?” Jemmy asked, fascinated.

“Not so much as they hope,” Mr. McElroy declared. “Them as was already pretty maybe get a little bit prettier. But them as is squinty-eyed or hatchet-faced, ain’t no amount o’ paint or powder will change it.”

“Do you not think, then, Mr. McElroy, that beautiful actions will not improve even the most ‘hatchet-faced’ from within?” said Evelyn, hoping to stem the tide of confidences that were pouring out of Mr. McElroy’s mouth.

“Now as to that, to be sure they can. I’ve seen many a homely woman, or man for that matter, transformed by a genuine smile. So those actions do not even have to be large or extensive.”

“I am glad that we are of like minds on this topic,” Evelyn said. “Else how should any of us retain any beauty in age?”

“True enough. And I will give you credit, Mrs. Swinton, for looking upon this miserable countenance,” he gestured toward his face, “without flinching.”

“Why should I not?” Evelyn asked. “Your suffering was in service to England. Does it pain you?”

“Now and again, but mostly only my jaw when the weather is wet.”

“How did it happen?” Jemmy asked with some interest.

“Some kind of clinging stuff that burned like fury. They rolled me in sand, but I lost the eye. Sawbones said I was lucky not to lose the other.”

“What happened to your leg?” Jemmy asked, wide-eyed, with a boy’s rampant curiosity.

“Musket ball. Got hit whilst they were dragging me away, can you imagine? They were firing on the wounded.”

“Not an uncommon practice,” Mayson said calmly. “Vile, but understandable. A man who leaves the battlefield and gets patched up can perhaps fight another day. If you are defending your homeland and want the, uh,” he glanced at Evelyn, “opposition to go away and stay gone, they don’t usually rise up out of the grave.”

“Dear me,” Evelyn said. “It is a wonder you survived at all, Mr. McElroy. Did you have any opportunity to see any part of Africa other than the battlefield?” She did not miss the grateful glance from Mayson as she turned the conversation to topics other than the household.

“I did,” Mr. McElroy replied with a smile that gave the unscarred side of his face a cherubic sweetness while pulling the scars on the other

side into a demonic mask. “We were camped near a great plain. There was an amazing lot of wildlife there, and we did not go hungry at that camp, let me tell you! There were herds of grazing animals of all sorts. If you went a short distance, there was a pride of lions that had their territory.”

“Oh, my! Were you not afraid that they might raid your camp?”

“With so many tasty wild creatures about? Not likely as long as we left them alone. Me an’ some other men crept up to the top of a little rise an’ watched them one day. The babies play together like a litter of barn kittens. It woulda been cute if we had not known that the parents could bite through a wildebeest’s bones.”

“You must come up and tell stories to the Duchess one evening,” Evelyn said. “She does not go out much, so stories of faraway places are her favorite amusement.”

“I would be honored,” Mr. McElroy said, going a little misty-eyed. “If you do not think she would be bored hearing stories from such a rough fellow as I.”

“The Duchess is a law unto herself. I will ask her, and see what she says. I can assure you that I am finding your accounts of the animals most fascinating.”

Thus encouraged, Mr. McElroy kept them well entertained with his descriptions of the various wildlife he had seen. He made no further mention of battles or action, nor did he recount the conditions in the healing tents. Evelyn watched Mayson’s face, sensing that he was profoundly relieved that Mr. McElroy was focusing on wildlife, flowers, and plants.

“There’s these gigantic trees,” the scarred man was saying, “that look like they was turned upside down and stuck in the ground with their roots all up in the air. The parson, who used to be a missionary in those parts, said they had a story something about lightning, thunder, and the gods being so angry they turned the trees upside down.”

“That is simply amazing,” Evelyn said. “I must leave you, gentlemen, for the Duchess likes to have everything in order when she rises in the mornings. Good night, and a pleasure meeting you, Mr. McElroy.”

As Evelyn made her way up the stairs, she wondered just how this would all turn out. Certainly, Jemmy was excited to be promoted to under cook, and just as certainly he deserved it. She hoped that Mr. McElroy was as good at washing dishes as he was at telling stories. Even though she was disappointed not to have her usual quiet meal with Mayson, she had to admit that despite his horrific scarring, Mr. McElroy seemed to be a perfectly amiable gentleman, if a little rough around the edges.

Then, there was that other thing, Mayson's revelation. She had known from the beginning that he seemed too well-bred, too personable to be a commoner. Not that cooks could not be refined of voice and countenance, but Mayson...

Mayson is exceptional. He is well-formed and athletic in ways that a working man would not be. His speech, while not pretentious, is meticulously phrased. And his face...

She let herself dream for just a moment.

His face was perfectly formed. His blue eyes, framed with thick, dark eyelashes, were like clear pools, deceptively simple yet amazingly deep. She longed to touch his thick, dark brown hair. Even at the end of the day, when it was damp from his work near the hot kitchen fires, and flattened from being confined under a cap, it tried to curl. When it was clean and dry, on their half-day picnics, it had an adorable cowlick at the crown just like that of a little boy.

If we had only the two of us to consider, running away to the colonies would be the best choice. He could continue to pretend to be dead, and leave the estate to his uncle. A shopkeeper's daughter can easily marry a cook, but she is unlikely to marry an Earl.

Evelyn sighed, and punched her pillow, trying to pummel it into some sort of comfortable shape, one that would comfortably support her head.

But it is not just the two of us. It is the Duchess, the Duke, Miss Notley, and all the people who live at Hillsworth who are being affected by its mismanagement. Why can life not ever be simple?

Chapter 23

Mayson missed the late evening tête-à-têtes with Evelyn, but

he could scarcely tell Jemmy and Mr. McElroy not to join them at the table. The kitchen was essentially a public area, which was why it raised no eyebrows that Evelyn sat down at table with him for their last meal of the day.

On the plus side, Evelyn knew a great deal about how to make things easier for a willing man who was not as strong as he had once been, and her example of grace and good table manners was helping both of his kitchen workers improve their social presence.

Occasionally, they were now joined by one or more of the maids. One evening, even Mrs. Henshaw deigned to enter the kitchen for a cup of golden milk. All of this served to help instruct his undercook and potboy in the necessities of hiring on with one of the great houses.

This particular evening it was just the three of them setting up the table, putting chairs around it, and sorting through the leftovers from earlier meals for food that needed to be eaten up or thrown into the pail for the estate's dogs and cats. Evelyn would be coming down the stairs soon, he knew, bringing the Duchess' last snack tray.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Evelyn appeared right on schedule. Her smile did not waver when she beheld Jemmy and Mr. McElroy, but her eyes met his for just an instant. He felt a frisson of longing dash through him as their gaze connected, and he tried to make his smile especially welcoming.

"There you are, Mrs. Swinton," he said politely. "Let me take that heavy tray. We have a place set for you."

"I am not very hungry," Evelyn replied, "But I will gratefully take an uninterrupted cup of tea."

Mayson held out her chair, preparing to push it in for her. But just as her weight descended fully upon the seat, it crumbled out from under her.

He was just able to catch Evelyn and set her upon her feet, keeping her from being bruised on the stone floor, at the very least. As it was, she limped back from the chair, rubbing one foot against the back of the other.

“Goodness!” she said. “I know I have gained a little weight since I’ve been eating your good cooking, but surely not so much as all of that!”

“It must be a weak joint in the chair,” Mr. McElroy put in. “I have a little experience with joinery. I can have a look at it, Mr. Rudge.”

“I would appreciate it, Mr. McElroy, but it can wait until tomorrow. In the meantime, Mrs. Swinton can have my chair and I will sit on the stool.”

So saying, he switched the plates rather than the chairs, and pulled over the stool normally reserved for the spit boy, whoever that might be for the day.

As he did so, he noticed that Mrs. Swinton was favoring her right foot.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Nothing to signify,” she replied. “Only a bruise from one of the braces on the chair. I am sure that it will be better by tomorrow.”

* * *

But it was not better the next day, and Dr. Alton was sent for.

He pronounced that one of the small bones in her foot was broken, and wrapped it in a plaster cast.

“She will not be able to run and fetch things for a fortnight or more,” the physician explained. “Is there someone who could take up that portion of her duties?”

“Molly Sue or Betty, perhaps?” Evelyn made a question of it, looking

toward the Duchess, who was tapping the chair-arm with her lorgnette.

The Duchess frowned. "It seems to me a very odd thing that a chair which has remained stable for nearly a half century should suddenly fall apart."

"Half a century?" Dr. Alton gave forth a hearty chuckle. "That could be your answer right there, Your Grace. But would you like for me to examine the chair before I leave the house?"

"I would," she replied. "While I have the greatest faith in Mr. Rudge, and in the abilities of Mr. McElroy by extension, I would like someone else to see the chair."

When the physician had stumped off toward the kitchen in company of Wilson, the Duchess turned to Evelyn and asked, "What do you remember happening?"

"I tucked you up in bed, then took your dishes down to the kitchen. Mr. Rudge has decided that I need fattening up, so he usually has a light snack for me. For both of us, really, and we share it. Of late, we have been joined by others."

"Others?" the Duchess frowned slightly.

"Young Jemmy, Mr. McElroy, Molly Sue, occasionally Betty, and once Mrs. Henshaw."

"Not Wilson?"

"No indeed, Your Grace. Wilson usually retires immediately after the servants' dinner. It is understandable, for he is usually up before daybreak, checking in on Jemmy and the progress of breakfast."

"But Mr. Rudge remains awake."

"Until I retire, yes, Your Grace. Our repast is usually the final event of the day."

"It used to be just the two of us, but somehow word has gotten around that extra goodies are to be had. It is no more than the serving staff

used to save back from the evening meal. Do not think we are running the household out of supplies.”

“Of that I am assured, my dear. Wilson has nothing but good things to say about the kitchen accounts, and he has long been a high stickler for knowing expenditures down to the last grain of spice. If he was apprehensive of either consumption or behavior, he would have made the effort to stay awake. Of that you may be certain.”

“I am pleased that we have his confidence, Your Grace. It makes me a great deal easier in my mind.”

The Duchess reached over to where Evelyn was seated in a wingback chair that had been drawn up next to her own and patted her hand. “You have my every confidence, Mrs. Swinton. I believe you are fond of our young cook, is it not so?”

Evelyn felt heat rising in her cheeks.

“I find him to be an exceptionally congenial person. Well-mannered, thoughtful, and kindly toward his fellow beings. While I have never seen him with a horse, the dogs in the kennel and the cats that hang about the kitchen, dairy, and stables all come running when he walks about in the yards between house and out buildings.”

The Duchess chuckled. “As to the cats, my dear, he has been known to put out scraps, is it not so?”

Evelyn nodded.

“That is likely to be the attraction for our local felines. Not that I mind. I prefer cats to mice any day of the week. It has filtered back to me that the hound master and stable master both think well of our cook, as does the gardener. He does not neglect to take care of the people in all parts of the house. But it is the events leading up to the broken chair that interest me, my dear. What happened when you got downstairs with the dishes?”

“Mr. Rudge, Jemmy, and Mr. McElroy were setting out the last scraps so that we could choose from them. Mr. Rudge had made meat pies of some of the leftover vegetables and broken meats.”

“Excellent. Go on.”

“Mr. Rudge addressed me as Mrs. Swinton, since we were in company, handed off the trays to Mr. McElroy, and pulled out my chair for me.”

“Such a mannerly young man. One does not often see that in the below-stairs serving staff.”

“Not often, Your Grace, but it is not unknown.”

“So, he pulled out the chair. Then what occurred?”

“One of the legs gave, and I would have tumbled to the floor but Mr. Rudge caught me with an arm around my waist. But a brace hit my foot as the chair continued to fall.”

“Around the waist. A rather intimate hold, would you not say so, Mrs. Swinton?” The Duchess gave her a very direct look.

“Oh, he set me on my feet and released me almost immediately, Your Grace. He was in no way improper.”

“I see.” The Duchess gave her a knowing little smile. “I am glad to know that he observed the proprieties while still not allowing you to tumble down. Remarkably quick for a cook, is he not?”

“He works to maintain his physique, Your Grace. I have interrupted him at his exercises once or twice. His shadow boxing is impressive.”

“Is it so? Well, this is not Starkey’s, so I shall not request a demonstration. He does have the military background, after all. As does Mr. McElroy, I believe.”

Evelyn had seen the Duchess play off being the vague elder once or twice, so she was not in the least taken in by this peroration. “Yes, as Your Grace full well knows, because you read through the notes before finalizing hiring him to the position.”

“But not the same division as Mr. Rudge,” Her Grace mused, completely unfazed by Evelyn’s conversational repost. “Some place down in Africa, was it not?”

“Yes, Your Grace. And I had been intending to ask you if you would like to invite him up to tea one afternoon, to tell tales about his

experiences.”

“A storyteller, is he?” Her Grace lifted one eyebrow.

“An excellent one, Your Grace. He tells wonderful stories about strange animals and funny trees and plants.”

“Perhaps at Christmas time, when we select a Lord of Misrule.”

“Do you observe that custom, Your Grace?”

“Oh, yes, and have mummers, too. I know they have fallen out of fashion in the city, but I have always found them amusing. Yes, I think having him tell a tale or two of his travels when the family and staff all dine together would be a marvelous idea. Perhaps we might even have a small supper with staff before then, since you are laid up and will not find it easy to go below stairs.”

“I can manage...” Evelyn began to say.

“Nonsense. You shall do no such thing. You can sleep here on the daybed, and Betty will act as maid to wait upon both of us.”

“Betty?”

“Yes, Betty. Molly Sue is competent, but she gossips and chatters until I heartily wish her in Jericho.”

Evelyn contemplated the fabric that covered her bare toes and the end of the strange contrivance of thin sticks and starched fabric that wrapped her ankle. It was unusual for the Duchess to take exception to any of her hand-picked staff. What precisely was it that irritated her about Molly Sue?

I doubt that it is the gossip, for the Duchess loves a juicy tale. No, there must be something else. Well, Betty will do well enough since I will be able to coach her. All the same, it will be a long fortnight with this dreary weight on my foot.

Chapter 24

Two shadowy figures stood in the dooryard of an old, broken-down stable at the edge of the Dower House grounds. Once a busy coach road had run nearby, and a gatehouse had stood opposite the stable. But now the old road was overgrown with grass and weeds. The gatehouse was a burned-out ruin. The stable was kept intact because the wagons and tack were kept there for when hay was harvested from the back meadows.

“A chair? She fell out of a chair? Just what was that supposed to accomplish?”

“It was not supposed to be her!” the other speaker said desperately. “If he was injured, he would not be able to cook, now would he? They’d have to call back Mr. Sparks because Jemmy ain’t no cook, not yet anyway.”

“Likely they would hire a different cook rather than call back Mr. Sparks.”

“It’s a dirty shame, how they done him,” the second speaker said, with mock outrage. “That poor old man, worked so hard all his life and turned out to pasture, just because the roast got burned.”

“Don’t you get to feeling too sorry for that old rogue. I was obliged to eat some of that roast, and not even Mr. Rudge was able to make it edible.”

“Mr. Rudge? But...”

“Hush, not another word,” said the first speaker. “Some things are best left unsaid. But you need to come up with a better idea, and that right quick. A chair! It is a wonder and a miracle they did not see the sawed-off end on that leg, or that it did not break before anyone had a

chance to sit in it. Better idea next time, and you'd better make sure you get the right person."

"I'm sorry, M..."

"Stop right there. No names. You never know when the walls might have ears."

"Out here? No one comes out here unless it is haying season."

"Or unless some young swain has an itch to scratch and has been able to talk a village girl into a tumble in the hay. And mind how you go back."

"Yes," the second speaker said, the honorific trembling upon lips accustomed to politeness. "I will be more careful, more circumspect."

"You had best. I want no mistakes. Make another like this one, and you will find yourself in worse case than Mr. Sparks."

The second speaker looked at the first fearfully, then nodded without saying anything.

"Off with you now, before you are missed."

Chapter 25

Dr. Alton smiled affably at his dinner companion. It was pleasant to share his evening meal, a privilege not often accorded to him. Constable Morris was an amiable dinner companion as long as you could keep him from talking shop at table.

As a physician, Dr. Alton had a strong stomach, but he preferred not to discuss business over dinner.

Constable Morris dug into the rabbit stew that was the Roadgrass Inn's main dish of the day. He clearly had all the appetite of a young man who had spent his morning walking up and down the village, becoming acquainted with the locals and the lay of the land.

"It is pleasant to see a young man enjoying his dinner," Dr. Alton said.

"This is good, really good," Constable Morris said, after hastily swallowing a bite. "You would not believe the swill that was standard fare at my last job. This is chock full of carrots, and I do love a good carroty stew."

"It is good that you do not require too much meat in your stew," Dr. Alton remarked.

"Meat? Nah. I can taste that this was rabbit, an' that it wasn't off when it went in it. But it's the carrots that I really like. The bread is good, too, an' the butter nice an' sweet... you don't get food like this up in London." Constable Morris single-mindedly mopped up the gravy out of his bowl with a bit of bread. "This is prime eatin', this is."

"Did you not enjoy the food at the Dower House?" Dr. Alton enquired.

"Of course I did!" Constable Morris affirmed. "Who wouldn't? But I

was nervous that I would use the wrong fork or forget to quirk my pinkie just so,” he demonstrated by quirking his little finger at an awkward angle whilst picking up his mug of ale.

“The best part o’ that meal was the dessert. It is good fortune that the young Miss was out of the room so’s we wasn’t treated to no Cheltenham tragedies whilst we were eatin’ it.”

“Have a care, Constable, when you are talking about the influential families,” Dr. Alton cautioned. “An inn is scarcely the place to discuss your patrons.” He glanced around the nearly empty room with its scarred tables, blackened rafters, and fireplace that was in dire need of a cleaning.

“I didn’t mean nothin’ by it,” Constable Morris looked down at his plate.

“Just a word to the wise,” Dr. Alton sighed, trying not to think about his own faux pas. “What did you think of the companion?”

Constable Morris picked up on the idea that a companion could be discussed, whereas the titled or nearly titled could not. “Purty as a pitcher. Seems odd that she should be a widow no older than she is.”

“Death does not always respect age. Her husband was carried away by consumption. She nursed him right to the end. I was concerned about her health since she was so intimately connected with him.”

“How would that matter, Dr. Alton?

“Consumption can be a contagious disease, the humours passing readily from one person to another.”

“Do you think that Mrs. Swinton might carry consumption to the Duchess?” Constable Morris asked, with some alarm.

“No, no. We burned John Swinton’s effects and all of the clothing that Mrs. Swinton wore while nursing him. Although that might not be completely effective, I believe it will suffice to keep from spreading the contagion. It has worked in other cases. Mrs. Swinton herself is hale and hearty, showing no signs of illness. Miss Notley, on the other hand...” Dr. Alton glanced around the nearly empty room, “Let us save that discussion for my office after dinner.”

When the two gentlemen finished their repast and wended their way peacefully back to the physician's small house, which contained his office, receiving room, and occasionally the village morgue, they settled themselves into his office.

"Brandy?" Dr. Alton asked.

"No, no," Constable Morris replied. "I have my rounds yet to walk tonight, and I'd just as soon do it with a clear head."

"A man does hate to drink alone," the physician remarked. "If it is wakefulness you require, perhaps we could share a small pot of kaffee."

"Kaffee?" Constable Morris immediately perked up. "I had a cup when I was in France. You actually have some?"

"I do. More than that, I have a pot and cups from Arabia, so I can brew it in the traditional fashion as it deserves."

For several minutes, the physician busied himself with crushing beans and preparing the pot. While it was simmering, he sat down in a curious chair that had patchwork cushions and two curved rails like sleigh-runners beneath. The body was woven, like a picnic basket. Constable Morris stared at it. With one foot, Dr. Alton set it into gentle motion.

"Never seen a rocking chair, constable?" the physician asked.

"Seen one, sir," the young man said thoughtfully, "but never one quite like that."

"Nor are you likely to see one just the same," the physician replied. "My father had this one sent from the Colonies just before the rebellion in 1776 on the recommendation of Benjamin Franklin."

The young constable's eyes grew round. "The American diplomat?"

"The very one. My father met him while he was here in England. The fellow was quite old by then, and he was bothered by gout. Apparently, the chair's movement was soothing to him. In all events, I find it soothing. Now, then, I think our *qahwah*, as it is called in

Arabia, is done.”

Dr. Alton poured the kaffee into tiny cups. The liquid was thick and syrupy. They took a few minutes to sip the thick, bitter liquid.

After a sip or two, Constable Morris said, “That will put hair on your chest.”

Dr. Alton laughed. “Indeed it will. More than that, it will leave your senses bright and alert, not dulled in the manner of wine or brandy.”

“You were going to tell me about Miss Notley,” Constable Morris reminded the physician. While he waited for a reply, he took another sip of the bitter liquid, trying not to grimace.

“Ah, yes. I am afraid I might have burned my bridges there. But we were talking about matters of health back there at the inn. You see, consumption has a stage where the sufferer has two high spots of color on their cheeks, yet the rest of their skin can be pale as milk. Their eyes look dark and mysterious, sunken into the head. Such an appearance is sometimes described as *pale and interesting* and many young ladies strive to achieve the seeming of it.”

“How would they go about doing that?”

Dr. Alton rocked meditatively for a moment. “They do it by applying a white powder derived from arsenic and they apply carnelian color to their faces, which also contains a toxic element. They often compound their condition by nibbling little wafers that contain arsenic, and by putting belladonna drops in their eyes. The toxins are highly addictive, of course, as is the desire to be extremely beautiful. It is a positive relief to see a lovely woman such as Mrs. Swinton, who employs no artifice at all, yet whose looks are incomparable.”

“She is a handsome figure of a woman,” the constable agreed. “Yet also polite, soft-spoken, and seems kindly.”

“I believe her to be so.” The physician rocked, and meditatively sipped his drink.

“But why would anyone do these things?” Constable Morris burst out. “Don’t they know it is bad for them?”

The physician sighed. "Of course they do. It is amazing the lengths to which some ladies will go in the name of beauty, especially when their personal security is on the line. I might add that some of them are so knowledgeable that they are fully capable of using their beauty powders and potions to commit murder."

"That is... unthinkable."

"Oh, but many do think of it," said Dr. Alton. "I was amazed at how Lady Carleton took umbrage when I explained the cause of her daughter's condition. If the young lady does not stop using the cosmetics and draughts her renowned London physician has prescribed, there is an excellent chance she will not live to see her wedding day."

"Do you think her mother has designs on her own daughter?"

Dr. Alton shrugged. "She would not be the first to cause the demise of a child, either by intent or through ignorance. While one does not like to say it, the beasts of the field are better examples of enlightened parenting than many humans."

"That is beyond astonishing, Dr. Alton. I swear, I shall be afraid to walk my rounds tonight lest some damsel in distress slip a powder into my drink or sprinkle me with her face powder."

The physician laughed. "I do not think you are in such danger as all that, but it never pays to stay alert."

The young constable bade Dr. Alton good night, and let himself out the door. "I'll never understand the posh coves," he muttered to himself. "Me mum warned me there would be days like this." He could not help but shudder a little as he looked up the hill to the stately manor that topped it.

Chapter 26

The Duchess stared despondently at the piece of gross-point embroidery on her loom. "It is all wrong, my dear Mrs. Swinton," she said.

"What is, Your Grace?" Evelyn looked up from sorting a tangled basket of embroidery threads that she was attempting to bring to order by winding them onto bobbins.

"This piece, of course. The orange is too garish against the yellow. It needs something in between."

"Perhaps this spool of gold ochre would bridge the gap," Evelyn suggested.

"No, no," the Duchess shook her head. "Too dull. I want it to look lively, vibrant."

Evelyn gazed thoughtfully at the Duchess. Her Grace's cap was askew, and her eyelids were suspiciously pink. "This is not about the yarn, is it, Your Grace?"

"No, dash it all," the Duchess admitted, blowing her nose with an unabashed honk. "How could I have been so blind as to not recognize Lady Carletane's distress? I should have had you to take her aside and distract her. I would have done it myself in my younger years."

"I cannot think how you could have anticipated her reaction, Your Grace," Evelyn soothed. "Nor is it easy to learn that the paints and powders that you use to make yourself beautiful are causing you to feel ill."

"No, I suppose not," the Duchess sighed. "If I were able to be up and

about as I was in my younger days, I would go to them and apologize. Ordinarily, I would send you to tender my regrets. Not for the information, but for upsetting them. I never meant for that.”

“Of course you did not, Your Grace. But, even though neither of us can go to them personally, you could send a letter. You could even invite them to tea. Promise not to include your physician, and ask M... that is, Mr. Rudge to cook up something soothing.”

“A superb solution!” the Duchess exclaimed. “Are you prepared to take a letter, Mrs. Swinton?”

“I can be in just a trice, Your Grace. I’ll ring for the footman to set up the writing table and bring me my small writing desk.”

In just a few moments, the desk was set up and Evelyn set to work on a draft of the letter. “What would you like to say, Your Grace?”

“You know my feelings,” the Duchess said. “Write out a formal apology, then read it out to me. We shall then work to improve it.”

For the next several moments, there was no sound in the room but the scratching of Evelyn’s pen. “Done,” she finally announced.

“Read it out,” the Duchess directed. “Then I shall have my son deliver it. I cannot think that she would refuse her promised husband.”

After a few adjustments, the letter was judged fit to send, and a footman dispatched to request the Duke’s presence at tea.

When the Duke put in an appearance, it was clear that he was in a distempered mood.

“What did you say to her?” he grumbled at his mother. “You know she is of a nervous disposition. My creditors know it, too. At the slightest sign that she might cry off, they begin circling like vultures over a battlefield.”

“Do you not wish for her to cry off?” his mother demanded. “I’ve seen the tension between the two of you, and it is not one that presages a happily wedded couple. But as to that, I have a plan to mend my connections with your intended and her parents. Would you be so

kind as to carry a letter for me? Tendering my apologies?"

The Duke's expression softened. "You would do this for me, Mother?"

The Duchess scowled at him. "Actually, I am doing it for myself. While Lavinia has no more brains than a goose, she will nurture a grudge as if she were hatching eggs. Given enough time, she will grow my error into a fabrication of plot sufficient to blanket the entire kingdom. Bird-witted though she is, she and I were school chums, and I have few enough living friends that I am loath to lose another."

The Duke laughed. "Very well, Mother. I will carry your letter for you, and wait for an answer. Perhaps I will have a chance to exchange a few words with Blanche while I wait. I am curious. What did Dr. Alton say was her difficulty?"

"He could not say for certain, but he believes she is being slowly poisoned by the paint and powder she wears. And that her condition might be aggravated with belladonna eye drops and some sort of health tonic."

"Her physician is collaborating in her slow death?" the Duke looked scandalized.

"It would seem possible. However, it is equally possible that she is dosing herself with something she has purchased from an apothecary. London abounds in them, and more than half are pure charlatans. It is no less daunting to discover that one might be the author of one's own troubles than to find that your physician is, at best, only human."

"And what did you learn about yours, dearest Mother?" he asked.

"That he is unlikely to ever launch a career as a diplomat," the Duchess said, somewhat bitterly. "However, if he is correct, your promised wife needs to stop painting her face and cease taking any vile concoctions she is currently dosing herself with. I know it is all the fashion to look pale and interesting, but there comes a time when one must make a choice between fashion and good health."

"What choice did you make, Mother?" needed her son.

The Duchess flapped a dismissive hand at him. "At the age your Blanche has reached, I had been a mother for two years. I had no time

for fripperies, and no desire for them. George liked me just as I was, and was happy to indulge my every whim. Despite it all, you were the only child. Goodness knows what damage Blanche has already done to her system. If you wish to beget an heir with her, all this foolishness must stop.”

“Mother, you send the most curious mixed messages. Just what is it you want?”

“Your happiness, my dearest boy. My friendship with Lavinia to continue. Good health for Blanche, whether she weds you or not. There. Is that motive enough for you?”

The Duke settled himself on one of the spindly occasional chairs that were placed near the Duchess, casually resting one ankle over the opposite knee.

“So you chose to have her examined by Dr. Alton, who has the worst bedside manner of any army surgeon I have ever encountered. One does wonder what he said to the men in the medical tents. Perhaps, *‘Well, there, soldier, we shall have to take off that toe, but you do not need it to pull a trigger. What? Visited a whore did you? A little mercury will cure you of the pox you have managed to pick up.’* And more like that, no doubt.”

“Mind your language, Darrius! There is no need to be crude. Dr. Alton might be blunt, but he has never displayed such poor taste as that. Moreover, since following his regimen, my health has improved daily.”

“That is observable, Mother. Moreover, it does you credit that you should wish to share his expertise. But even you must admit that he is blunt to a fault. Yet, his ability is not in doubt. Therefore, I will carry your letter and act as an ambassador besides. Hopefully, this is merely a tempest in a teapot, and will quickly blow over. I doubt if Lady Carletane wishes to lose your friendship either, especially since it helps puff up her prestige.”

“Darrius! How can you speak so?”

“Easily, Mother. I suspect that your paid companion is a better friend to you than is the Lady Carleton. All the same, I understand and endorse your desire to mend fences. I will carry your letter.”

“Thank you, Darrius. Will you take tea before you go?”

“I would. Goodness knows in what mood I shall find Blanche and her mother. They may well throw me and the letter out before I get a chance to even open my mouth.”

Evelyn sat quietly, making a fair copy of the approved version of the letter.

It would be good for both of them if Lady Carleton and Miss Notley relent, but I fear that such might not be the case. I will say a quiet prayer for them all before I sleep tonight. And perhaps one for Mayson and I as well.

*M*r. Sparks sat by his daughter's kitchen fire. He was supposed to be watching the roast, but he kept nodding off.

Not sleeping well. Can't sleep, here I am living with my daughter, like I was some sort of giant baby.

He gave the roast, which was nothing more than the fore shank off a pig his son-in-law had butchered for a neighbor, a desultory turn.

Not a proper roast at all. Not like that last 'un up at the hall. I had not meant to burn it, when the house got quiet at night it was hard as a mother-in-law's heart to stay awake. Durned upstart young cockerel of a cook!

His daughter came to the kitchen door. "Some 'un to see you, Da," she called. Then she turned to an unseen person, and said, "There now, I've waked him up for you."

The visitor came in and sat on one of the kitchen stools. "I don't think that roast will get done before all the fat melts away and it will then turn into gristle."

"Happen you are right," Mr. Sparks said. "But my daughter asked me to turn it, so turn it I shall."

"Don't seem right, you bein' turned out like that. You should have had head cook after the old one up and quit. You been there long enough."

Mr. Sparks sucked at his lower lip, a habit he had acquired after four of his teeth fell out. Fool doctor man said he needed to eat vegetables and eat some apples.

Apple a day to keep the doctor away, ha!

It had not kept them away from his wife, who had loved apples. He missed the old woman, he did.

“You come down here to tell me that?”

“Might. An’ might be I came to bring some pap an’ catlap that hoity-toity Frenchified cook sent. He seems to think you need fattenin’ up.”

“Din’ seem to think that way when I was there. Always goin’ on about not stickin’ yer fingers in stuff.”

His visitor laughed. “That might o’ had somethin’ to do with you filchin’ icin’ off the Duchess’ birthday cake. Mr. Rudge was fit to be tied, ‘specially since he had to scrape all the icin’ off an’ redo it. He was in a lather worryin’ about whether it would harden enough before time to be served.”

Mr. Sparks cackled a broken old laugh. “He were that, weren’t ‘e?”

“Would you like to get some of your own back?” the visitor asked.

“Would I ever! That young whippersnapper tuck bein’ cook right out from under my nose.”

“Very well,” said the visitor, “Here is what I want you to do...”

After the visitor departed, Mr. Sparks puzzled over his instructions. *Why would anyone want the tack room in the old stables read-up?*

Granted it had a roof, and even a stall or two that were still intact.

Well, for the tidy pouch of coin offered, I will be glad to read-up a dozen such rooms.

But it would not do to let on that such was the case. He went back to turning the roast with more enthusiasm.

Perhaps I could keep enough juice in it to feed the family.

Chapter 28

Darrius knocked at the door of Carleton Manor with some trepidation. He was relieved when the butler admitted him, even though he was left to wait in the front hall while the fellow carried his card up to the ladies of the house. His heart lightened even more when he was ushered, with some ceremony, into the presence of Lady Carleton and her daughter.

It seemed that the two of them had been having a serious discussion. He was somewhat astonished by Blanche's appearance, for the face she turned on him was innocent of all adornment, even her delicate eyebrows had been shaven away. Had she been drawing them on, he wondered.

The change made her look younger, vulnerable in a way he had never seen her. Her eyelids and the end of her nose were both slightly pink, as if she had been crying.

Lady Carleton, dressed in her usual outmoded finery, was still powdered and rouged, just as she might have done twenty years before. "I shall be direct," she said. "Why are you here?"

"Do I need an excuse to visit my intended wife?" Darrius asked.

"You have never called upon us before," Lady Carleton said bluntly. "Not since your father's death."

"I beg your pardon. I have been remiss. Father's death left a vacancy that I am finding it difficult to fill. However, I am here now. Thank you for receiving me."

"Is that the only reason you have come to call on us?" Blanche asked, her eyes large in the pale blue shadows between brow and cheekbone.

Darrius found himself fascinated by the childlike nakedness of her face, and by her pallor.

Was she truly ill after all? Had the powder and rouge been hiding a deeper malady?

Aloud, he replied, "I will own that I am on an errand for my mother. She has written to extend her apologies for upsetting you. I would like to add my own apologies to hers." So saying, he took the folded, sealed missive from his pocket and passed it to Lady Carleton.

"I want to read it in private," the lady said. "Perhaps the two of you would like to take a turn in the garden?"

"I can think of nothing better," Darrius said, bowing to the ladies, first the mother, then the daughter.

"Of course, Mother," Blanche said. "We shall leave you alone."

Blanche led the way from the drawing room to a small rose garden. A basket, a pair of gloves, and a pair of shears sat on a bench near a small fountain. The water bubbled up and flowed gently out of an upper stone basin into a lower one.

"An artesian well?" Darrius asked.

"Of course," Blanche replied. "Do you not remember falling into it? Your father was quite wroth with you, as I recall."

"As I recall," Darrius retorted, "You pushed me into it."

"So I did. You were insufferable at ten years of age."

"So were you."

They stood in silence for a few minutes. "I owe the Duchess an apology," Blanche said.

"For what?" Darrius asked.

"For taking her physician's advice badly. Mother does not know this, but I went back to him yesterday."

“You did?”

“Yes. I stopped taking the draughts prescribed by the London physician, but I felt terrible. I took to my bed for a couple of days, then my maid found me thrashing about uncontrollably. Dr. Alton was the nearest physician I could consult, so my maid and I slipped out without Mother.”

“Did you, indeed?” Darrius felt a rising degree of respect for his intended.

Blanche nodded. “Dr. Alton said that if I was being dosed in the manner he suspected, that I was fortunate to have gotten off with only a light fit. He prescribed a different draught, just to still the shakes. Then a different one still which he said would build my system. Both taste vile, but I am feeling better.”

“That is splendid. I was worried about you,” Darrius said. “You had a great deal of spunk when we were children.”

“Thank you.”

They walked on for several minutes. “Have you come to any means of solving your pecuniary difficulties?” Blanche asked.

“I have a matter in mind. More importantly, it looks as if the crops will be good this year, which means that the rents will be paid on the fields and shops.”

They walked a little more.

“What about your parents?” Darrius asked. “How are they faring?”

“Now that I have persuaded Mother to discharge the London physician, I believe they will do well enough. My dowry is invested in long-term affairs, and it will be some years before it can be touched.”

“Then it is likely that we can decide rationally whether to continue this engagement or to mercifully terminate it without devastating either of our prospects.”

“Should we do so, Darrius?” Blanche turned that frank, child-like face

up to him.

Darrius was still having a hard time reconciling this new-found creature with the stiff, painted lady with the fashionably tiny waist, who had graced his mother's dining hall just a week or so ago.

"Why don't we give it a month or two more?" he suggested. "As I walk with you today, I feel that we have not truly met since that summer when you pushed me into the fountain, and later on the same day, thwacked me with a cricket bat."

"Oh, you have met me," Blanche said. "You just did not look beneath the fashionable facade we are taught to cultivate in finishing school. I am glad that the Duchess has written to my mother. She has done nothing but mope since the doctor's pronouncement."

"Does my mother's friendship mean so much to her?" Darrius asked.

"I think it must. I will admit I had no idea that there was anything more between them than the usual rivalry between society ladies."

At this point, they were interrupted by a footman. The fellow stood a respectful distance away, and bowed to them.

"Yes?" Blanche asked.

"Lady Carleton has read the letter, Miss Notley, and she is ready to send a reply. If he can see his way to manage it, she would like to send it back with His Grace."

"His Grace would be pleased to act as messenger boy between his mother and her friend, Lady Carleton," the Duke said.

When they re-entered the drawing room, Lady Carleton greeted them with a smile. "I am delighted to accept your mother's gracious apology. I fear I also acted badly, and I have written a reply. Will you be kind enough to carry it to her?"

"That is a duty I will gladly undertake," Darrius replied. He accepted the sealed letter, and slid it into his coat pocket.

After a few more social exchanges, he took his leave of the ladies,

climbed into the despised elderly coach, and made his way back toward Tolware.

I am all at sea. How could merely washing the coating from her face make such a change in Blanche? More than that, what should I make of the revelation that her dowry shall be tied up in funds for some years to come? Upon our marriage, my creditors will expect some sort of payment. How can I eke meaningful amounts, needed repairs, a decent wardrobe, and proper coach out of the quarterly income?

Do I wish to part with this newly revealed Blanche? What can I offer her now that will keep her by my side?

Chapter 29

August brought the first flurry of harvest, and saw the cast removed from Evelyn's foot. Those were the two bright spots of the month.

Mayson despaired of finding enough root vegetables intact to cook a meal fit for guests. The tithes from the farms would be delivered in a day or two, so no one was in danger of starving. The crops had flourished, and the villagers were holding dances and other celebrations almost nightly. Meanwhile, Mayson and the cooking staff were busy hauling out and either cooking or throwing away the remnants of last year's provisions.

In the name of frugality, it was his job to convert these last remnants into something edible while overseeing the clearing and cleaning of the cellars so as not to spoil the new crops. As he arranged slices of neeps, carrot, and onion in a baking dish, he heard the welcome sound of Evelyn's light slippers on the stairs.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wilson," he heard her call.

Wilson's reply was a vague grumble. Although the elderly butler was not expected to dust out the butlery himself, he had bestirred himself to lend a hand with checking and turning the bottles. As the only staff member truly able to judge whether wine was likely to still be good, the venerable fellow was nearly as smudged and tired as the below-stairs staff. It was grave testimony to the household's labors, for Wilson prided himself on being impeccably turned out at all times.

The household's five footmen were kept busy running upstairs and down, with occasional forays into town for such small supplies as could not be found in the storerooms. If all this were not enough, the Duchess had Evelyn running all over the house making certain that every room was spotless and impeccably presentable.

The occasion? Lord and Lady Carleton were expected for dinner. It was unclear to Mayson why this particular dinner should be so much more important than any other dinner that had been served to their neighbors. Evelyn had tried to explain it to him, but he finally shook his head and commented, "I will certainly do my best to turn out a fine meal for them. But Evelyn, this seems almost like a schoolgirl spat between friends."

"I think you have the right of it, Mayson," she had replied. "While having pretended to despise each other all these years, in the end the Duchess and Lady Carleton are nearly the last of their circle of friends. Who else can they turn to but each other? I am relieved that they are making up. Just think how lonely it would be for both of them if they were to go through the rest of their lives without a single friend."

Mayson had opened his mouth to reply, but they had been interrupted and were both pulled away to their duties.

During the last few days it had been difficult for the two of them to meet. Even their half-days had been shortened, thanks to the need to train Jemmy in the finer details of running a kitchen, and having to keep an eye on Mr. McElroy who tended to carry on as if he were a whole man. It would have been admirable save that it caused a need to rescue him from his own efforts on more than one occasion.

"I hope you have something uplifting for Her Grace," Evelyn said. "She is in quite the flurry of anticipation, and keeps sorting through her special treasures, trying to decide what she should use to spark scintillating conversation."

"I'm afraid I have only an ordinary sort of tea," Mayson replied ruefully. "Nearly the last of the black India tea, and some sweet biscuits colored with beet juice."

"Are the biscuits in shapes?" Evelyn asked, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Tulips," Mayson replied. "Her Grace's favorite flower, I believe."

"Those should do very well," Evelyn reassured him. "The tea will help uplift her spirits. She is so worried that Lady Carletane will not be impressed with the evening meal."

“That is a challenge,” Mayson admitted. “We are still cleaning the cellars. But I have made some apple pies, and have spiced them in what I am told is the fashion in the colonies. It seems odd, for I would think that they did not get shipments from the British East India Company.”

“Perhaps they are trading with the French,” Evelyn suggested. “I understand that some parts of the colonies supported Napoleon, and that they bought land from France.”

“How odd,” Mayson commented. “I suppose that is how they obtained funds to continue their end of the war. What a relief that it is over.”

“Is it over?” Evelyn asked.

“For all intents and purposes,” Mayson replied.

“I think that there has always been conflict raging across the English Channel,” Evelyn said slowly. “The tutor who instructed the children in my neighborhood would become quite incensed by what he called ‘Frankish nonsense.’ I wonder what ever became of him?”

“Would you like to go back to your old neighborhood and inquire?” Mayson asked.

“I am not sure. I think I would like to remember it as it was, not as it has probably become.”

“I understand,” Mayson said, putting the last finishing touches on the tea tray. “Would you like for me to carry this up for you?”

“You are so busy,” Evelyn replied. “I would hesitate to ask it of you. I can manage today, no more than is on it. I do not want to take you away from planning dinner for the Duchess’ guests.”

“If you are sure.” Mayson gazed longingly at her. He had seen so little of Evelyn in the last few weeks, between her being mostly confined to the upper chambers with a cast on her foot, then with the flurry of activity that centered around training a young cook and keeping an eye on Mr. McElroy.

“I can manage. Do not fret, Mayson. There will be time for us when

the harvest is over.”

“I hope so. I miss our half-days.”

“As do I.” Evelyn sighed. “Sometimes I think we should simply run away together, but that would be shirking our responsibilities. How is Jemmy coming along as under cook?”

“Quite well, actually. He did a complete baking of bread this last week, and had mastered roasting and frying long ago, thanks to Mr. Sparks lack of diligence.”

“How fortunate that something good came of that. Well, I must get this tray up the stairs before the tea grows cold. Perhaps we will find some time to talk after the Duchess’ dinner party.”

“I do hope so,” Mayson said.

He watched for a moment as she picked up the tray, its weight causing the muscles in her back to emphasize her slender waist. Then, he chided himself for being a dolt, and hurried to hold the door open for her.

Mayson gave a sigh of his own as he returned to assembling vegetables in the baking dish. It was not an imaginative preparation, but with a little meat broth and fat for seasoning, some spices and a crust, it would do well enough as a side dish.

Would it not be wonderful to run away with Evelyn?

Mayson imagined the two of them planting a small garden and cooking a meal of some wild-caught thing over an open fire. He tried to think what they might hear or see, but his imagination only served up the sounds of an English forest.

He tugged his mind back to what he was doing before despair overtook him. Sometimes it seemed to him as if he were caught in a trap of his own devising and would never find his way out. He could not, in good conscience, leave the Duchess without a competent cook. Even though he had visited with his magistrate friend, and started the process of proving his identity, it would be some time before he could return to Hillsworth as its master.

What a tangle. I ran to preserve my life, but how it has complicated everything. Why did I not go to my friend in the first place? But then, I would have never met Evelyn. She makes all the rest worthwhile, even trying to make turnips, carrots, and onions into a dish fit to serve to a Duchess.

Little did he know that the quiet tenor of his life was about to change, and not necessarily for the better.

Chapter 30

Evelyn trudged up the steps to the Duchess' chambers, her mind spinning fanciful air castles about a future that would include Mayson. In her heart, she knew that they had no foundations. He was already making inquiries through his magistrate friend about taking back his inheritance.

But I can dream, can I not? It harms no one, and it makes me feel good for a moment or two.

Deftly, she entered the Duchess' chamber without even making the tea service rattle on the tray and set it down on the tea table. "Look, Your Grace, Mr. Rudge has prepared some special biscuits and some fortifying black tea."

"Just the thing," the Duchess exclaimed. "Oh, my... pink tulips. I do adore tulips. Some people think they are too stiff and formal to be pretty, but that is just why I like them." She bit into one of the biscuits, then stared at it in puzzlement. "An odd flavor."

"Mr. Rudge is working with the last bits of last year's supplies. It is my understanding that the new harvest will be here in a day or two, and we shall be feasting."

"Oh, of course. I always forget that this is how it is each year. Has he had the cellars whitewashed yet?"

"I think most of them, Your Grace. There are still one or two root cellars to go, I believe."

The Duchess' eyes crinkled up at the corners. "Beet juice for coloring?"

“Oh, you are too good, Your Grace. Yes, I think so.”

“Well, it is a better way to use it up than to try to make it into a drink. I seem to remember Mr. Sparks having tried to ferment beet juice one year. The results were explosive. The old cook we had at that time nearly had him turned off then and there.”

“Mr. Sparks has something of a history, then?”

“Oh, my, yes. He was but a lad when he came to us, and he has grown up and grown old in that kitchen. It seems odd that he should be pensioned off now. But then, it seems odder still not to be able to walk beyond the end of the garden without wheezing like a bellow.”

“I think I know how you feel,” Evelyn said. “Some years, it seems as if nothing stands still and remains the same. Sometimes I wish...” she paused, then shook her head. “No, everything happens for a reason. I must believe that.”

“I would like to think so,” the Duchess reassured her. “There are times when one wonders just what that purpose could possibly be, but I suppose that is why the churchmen all say that ‘Life is a Mystery.’” She made her voice deep and pretentious, as if she were a member of the clergy addressing an ignorant crowd.

Evelyn giggled, just as the Duchess had probably meant for her to do.

“That is better, my dear. Focus on the here and now. These biscuits are very pretty, even if they do taste a little odd. Perhaps we could feed them to the birds, and Mr. Rudge would be none the wiser. He so rarely makes a dish that is not delicious, I would scarcely wish to hurt his feelings.”

“Oh, Your Grace, I do not think he would be hurt. He commented while I was below-stairs that he was having a difficult time inventing dishes that would use up the last of the old supplies so that we could make way for the new.”

“Tell him to donate the rest of it somewhere, Mrs. Swinton. There is no need for him to torture himself with trying to use up every jot and tittle before the new harvest arrives. I, for one, am quite looking forward to fresh fruit and crispy greens.”

“What kinds of fruit is there, usually?” Evelyn asked.

“That is right. You have not yet been here a whole year,” the Duchess commented. “Apples, of course, and pears. Late plums. The cherries are already gone by now, of course, and so are the strawberries, blueberries and melons. Soon it will be winter, and we will only have preserved fruit or the fruits that keep well in the cellars. How I do detest winter fruit.”

Evelyn sighed. She knew too well exactly what the Duchess meant. Fruit that was brought in from the orchards was crisp and tart, but by midwinter it began to shrivel and the inside was mealy. Toward spring, sorting was a constant chore, picking out the apples that had spots so they could be quickly cooked up before they went bad.

“I have heard that there are some parts of the world where you can pick fresh fruits all year round,” Evelyn said. “Would it not be a marvelous thing?”

“Beyond all doubt.” The Duchess took a bite of one of the tulip-shaped biscuits. “Perhaps it is not too bad. The flavor seems to improve with custom. Perhaps with a few spices added, so that it tasted a bit like pickled...”

“Mrs. Swinton!” Betty appeared at the doorway. “Oh, Mrs. Swinton. Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but she is needed at once. Mr. Rudge took a tumble down the cellar stairs, and hit his head. He is asking for Mrs. Swinton.”

“You must go at once!” the Duchess exclaimed. “I shall do well enough. Oh, mercy sakes, whatever shall we do?”

“I’ll send word back as quickly as I can,” Evelyn said, already hastening toward the door.

Jemmy and Mr. McElroy met her at the bottom of the kitchen stair.

“Oh, Lor’, Mrs. Swinton. I’m that glad to see you,” Jemmy cried out, wringing his hands together. “He’s hollerin’ out about scars, and marks, and I don’ know w’at all.”

“I think he believes he is in France,” Mr. McElroy put in. “If I’m not mistaken, he has twisted an ankle, maybe broken it, and he hit his

head.”

Mr. McElroy then beckoned for Evelyn to come closer. When she was a little nearer he bent his head so that his mouth was close to her ear. “I think someone greased the steps. Those old stone pavers don’t take much to make ‘em slick. Mr. Rudge has been runnin’ up an’ down ‘em all day, so’s it would not take much to guess that he would be going that way.”

“Do you truly think so?” Evelyn’s cheeks felt cold as a frisson of alarm shot through her.

“I would not say so if I did not think it,” Mr. McElroy affirmed. “But who would do such a thing? Mr. Rudge is good to everyone.”

“I have no idea,” Evelyn considered for a moment. “The only person I can think of who might have a grudge of any kind would be Mr. Sparks. But he was sent to live with his daughter. The Duke is paying for his keep, and giving him a small allowance to boot.”

“One might think that should be enough,” Mr. McElroy pondered the thought. “But you never know how folks will take a thing. Could it have been that he resented being pensioned off?”

“I have no idea,” Evelyn said. “Please, take me to Mr. Rudge. Has someone sent for Dr. Alton?”

“Sent the fastest footman just now, Mrs. Swinton. He should be back with him directly. But what is to be done about dinner?” Mr. McElroy wrinkled his brow with worry.

Evelyn felt a momentary flash of rage, then she remembered. The Duchess was expecting guests. Of course dinner would be of prime importance.

“I’ll see to it,” Jemmy said bravely. “Mr. Rudge already has most of it ready, so all that needs to happen is the last touches. You go on and see to Mr. Rudge, Mrs. Swinton. He’s frettin’ somethin’ fierce.”

Indeed, when Evelyn entered Mayson’s small room, Mayson was turning his head from side to side, and pushing Molly Sue away.

“No! Stay away from me!” he protested in a harsh tone.

“Oh, thank goodness!” Molly Sue greeted Evelyn. “I think he has injured his brain somehow.”

Evelyn hastened across the few steps from the door to Mayson’s bed, and sank to her knees, bringing her face near his head where it lay on the pillow.

“Mayson, Mayson, I’m here. It is Evelyn.”

“Evelyn?” Mayson fixed his eyes on her.

“I’m here Mayson.”

“Ah,” It was a sigh of profound relief. “My head aches, Evelyn.”

“No wonder! You have a great purple bruise forming on the side of your head. Molly Sue, is there any ice left in the ice house?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Swinton, I don’t believe there is. Would cold cloths soaked in the spring house be all right?”

“Better than nothing,” Evelyn said. “Can you...?”

“At once!” Molly Sue hurried away.

Mayson turned his face toward Evelyn. “I am not thinking properly,” he said.

“No wonder! But Dr. Alton will be here soon. He will know what to do.”

“Don’t let anyone else see me!” Mayson clutched at her. “Don’t give me to the butchers.”

“Dr. Alton. No one else. It will be all right.” She placed her hand against his cheek.

“You are here,” he said again, leaning into her hand. “I feel safe now.”

“You are, Mayson. I am here. We are all here for you.”

“Dinner!” he started up from his pillow.

“Will be fine,” Evelyn, gently pressed him back down. “Jemmy will finish it. He says you already had it well on the way, and that he can finish it.”

“Jemmy isn’t ready, Evelyn. He is not ready for a full meal.”

“He has help, Mayson. Mrs. Henshaw, Mr. Wilson, and even Mr. McElroy will help him.”

“Are you sure he can do it?”

“Yes, he can do it, it will be fine, Mayson.”

Just then Dr. Alton entered, and the room was suddenly far too small. Evelyn stood, pressing herself into the corner to make room.

“Well, now, what has happened to my favorite cook?” Dr. Alton asked heartily.

“I fell down the cellar stairs,” Mayson said, sounding almost like a hurt child.

“So I see,” Dr. Alton said. He took up the lighted candle from the bedside table. Gently, he helped Mayson sit up. He held the candle in front of his face, and moved it back and forth

“Good. I do not think you are concussed, but you are going to have one magnificent bruise. Ah, cool cloths. Just the thing. Mrs. Swinton, can you stay with him? Keep changing out the cloths. We will try to get that swelling down.”

“Of course I can,” Evelyn replied.

Molly Sue peered in from the door. “What about the Duchess? What about dinner?”

“The Duchess knows where I am. She will send for me if she needs me.”

“Well, are not you the privileged princess, shop-keeper’s daughter,”

Molly Sue bristled.

Dr. Alton set the candle down firmly on the bedside table, turned Molly Sue around, and pushed her out the door.

“It will be all right,” Evelyn comforted Mayson. “Everything will be fine.”

It is going to be fine because I will make it fine. I will take care of him. He will get well.

Chapter 31

Darrius expected to find his mother's household in a high state of expectation for the upcoming dinner party. Wilson met him at the front door punctiliously and said, "Your Grace, the Duchess requests your presence in her chambers. Dinner will be ready shortly, but there might be some delay."

Delay? What could possibly occasion a delay? Mother has been looking forward to this dinner party for weeks, ever since Lady Carletane resumed communication with her.

When he entered his mother's drawing room, he found her attended by Betty instead of Mrs. Swinton.

Betty was looking anxious and distraught, as well she might, for she was not trained as a lady's maid nor as a companion. But the young maid was making a valiant effort to arrange the Duchess' hair in its customary tower.

"Mother? What has happened?" Darrius asked.

"Mr. Rudge has fallen down the cellar stairs, and I have dispatched Mrs. Swinton to see to him. The undercook is having to finish dinner, and Molly Sue is having to do double-duty since I have pressed Betty into service as my handmaiden for the evening."

"Will she sit at table in Mrs. Swinton's place?" Darrius asked, curious at this turn of events.

"Goodness, no!" the Duchess looked shocked. "No, she will go down and sit with Mr. Rudge while Mrs. Swinton does her duty in that regard. I'm afraid I cannot spare her from my side for so long as that."

“Why is she not with him now?”

“Because Dr. Alton is here and I am depending upon Mrs. Swinton to give me a full report, not only upon Mr. Rudge’s condition, but also upon the state of the kitchen. She has enough household knowledge to make an accurate assessment of the state of dinner, and whether we should send out for something.”

“If you had apprised me of the event, I could have brought my cook from the Main House,” Darrius reproved gently.

“Indeed, this has all occurred so quickly and so close to dinner, that there was no time to send for you. That is why I asked that you attend me immediately.”

“What of Mrs. Henshaw? Can she not help?”

“Rest assured that she is,” the Duchess affirmed. “What ever would I do without her? But even as able as she is, she is but one person. Wilson has mobilized the footmen to assist, and reports that Mr. McElroy is an able cook’s helper.”

“Well, that is a relief. So we are not anticipating a dinner of boiled vegetables and burned roast?”

“I do not believe so. But preventing that eventuality is one reason I have dispatched Mrs. Swinton below stairs.”

“Dear me, this is an unfortunate turn of events,” Darrius remarked. “If you wish it, I can send back to the Main House for my cook.”

“Let us wait on that just a little, Darrius. It is my hope that the young undercook is sufficiently trained to turn out something edible. I certainly would not have preferred to undertake this dinner party with an inexperienced hand in the kitchen, but I am grateful that Mr. Rudge has been working with him.”

“When might we expect Mrs. Swinton from below stairs?”

“I am here,” Evelyn said, appearing at the drawing room doorway. “I just need a few minutes to go to my room and freshen up.”

“How is Mr. Rudge?” the Duchess asked.

“His ankle is broken, and he has a sizeable bruise on the side of his head. He is in some pain, but Dr. Alton is reluctant to administer anything for the pain, lest he have a concussion. The youngest footman is sitting with him and changing out cold cloths on the ankle. Mr. Rudge seems to settle better with him than with one of the maids.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Darrius said equably. “A gentleman would feel less constrained with one of his own gender in attendance. How is dinner?”

“Ready to be served, Your Grace. Mrs. Henshaw is seeing to the final touches while Jemmy takes care of the larger items. He set Mr. McElroy to tending the roast as soon as he realized that there might be a problem, so it will be well-basted and perfectly turned. It seems that Mr. McElroy has a deft hand with roasting.”

“Excellent. I am somewhat surprised that there will be a roast at this season,” Darrius commented.

“It is only mutton, Your Grace. One of the ewes was mired near the brook and broke her neck in the struggle to get free. The shepherd quite rightly skinned it out. We have the choicest parts, while the rest has been shared out among the neediest villagers.”

“Well managed,” Darrius approved. “Was this the shepherd’s idea, Mrs. Swinton?”

“Mr. Rudge’s, actually, but it had Mr. Wilson and the head farmer’s approval.”

Darrius nodded, but had nothing further to say upon the matter.

“Now, if I might be excused?” Evelyn queried. “I will be back in a trice to see to your coiffure, Your Grace, but I believe that Betty has it well in hand. Nicely done, Betty.”

“Of course, my dear,” the Duchess said. “But do hurry. Let us try to avoid further disasters before dinner. Ordinarily, I would be quite equable with waiting or having a simple supper, but this one is quite important to me.”

"I understand. I shall be but a moment," Evelyn said.

After the companion had left the room, Darrius said, "Do you ordinarily allow her such latitude, Mother? That was quite a high-handed entrance and exit with commensurate insouciance."

"Considering the events of the day, I appreciate her willingness to get on with things with great dispatch. We have little time before my guests are likely to arrive."

"I understand," Darrius said, making a mental note to keep an eye on Mrs. Swinton's manner in the future. She seemed to be getting a bit above herself.

The Duchess' faith in her companion seemed to be justified, however, for in short order, Mrs. Swinton returned, attired in her usual somber evening gown. She quickly checked Betty's work, made one or two adjustments to the Duchess' coiffure, and they were ready to assay the journey to the dining room.

The Duchess struggled to her feet, then strolled in her ponderous way to the dining room where she sat at the head of the table.

Soon the guests began to arrive. They were, of course, Lord and Lady Carletane and their daughter, Blanche. The magistrate, constable, and physician were also in attendance. The table ran a bit heavily toward masculine attendance, but that was balanced by Mrs. Swinton's modest presence.

It was, in many ways, the same dinner party as had last been held in that room save for the addition of Dr. Alton and the much-changed appearance of Miss Notley.

Rather than seeming listless and peevish as she had at the previous dinner, she seemed almost wraithlike, yet pleasant and affable. Her face, innocent of paint or powder, was pale and her eyes were hollowed, yet bright.

By contrast, Lady Carletane's face was copiously painted and powdered. She wore a wig of a style twenty years out of date, and her dinner gown was similarly out of fashion. For all of that, she clearly had put on her best for the occasion.

The Duchess levered herself out of her chair, extending both hands to her old friend. "Lavinia! It is so good to see you in person, although your letters have cheered me greatly."

"I am grateful to see you as well," Lady Carleton replied, air kissing the Duchess on both cheeks. "It is a pleasure to see you standing up on your feet."

"It is all thanks to Dr. Alton and our able cook's ability to carry out his food prescriptions. I walked all the way to the end of the garden and back."

"I will own that his recommendations have done wonders for Blanche," Lady Carleton admitted. "But I simply cannot bear to appear in public without my face properly put on."

"When Blanche is fully recovered, I think you will find it worth your while to give up such fripperies in the interest of good health," Dr. Alton put in. Then he raised his hands, as if to ward off an attack. "But do not let that come between the two of you or between you and your daughter. I am a crude old soldier, unschooled in proper society manners."

"We shall make a civilized man of you yet," Lady Carletane averred. "And I shall forgive you your blunt forwardness, in light of my daughter's continued improvement."

"I bow to your social wisdom as you bow to my knowledge of health, Lady Carletane. Thus we are both well served."

"It would seem," Darrius observed, "That the good doctor's diplomacy has already improved."

"Or at the very least, his value to my wife," Lord Carletane added with a chuckle. "It has been a relief to have a daughter who is steadily feeling better as a result of her physician's advice."

"Late Summer Vegetable Soup," Wilson announced, and the serving staff brought in the first course.

Darrius tasted it, and was relieved to note that it was up to the household's usual excellence. General conversation came to a halt as the company tasted the soup.

“Excellent,” the magistrate murmured to the physician. “Perhaps a medical recommendation?”

“No, merely the dictates of cleaning out the cellars,” Dr. Alton murmured back. “But not contrary to good sense and good health.”

As each course was brought to the table, no discernable loss of quality was noted until the dessert was brought in. It was a light applesauce spooned over a sponge cake, good enough in its own way but not the sort of dish usually prepared by the Dowager House’s renowned cook.

“That was excellent,” the Duchess said to Wilson. “Will you request that the cook come up to receive compliments?”

Wilson gave her an odd look, but at her slight nod, he said, “Of course, Your Grace. It will take only a moment.”

It was not Mr. Rudge who came to the door in white chef’s hat and clean apron, but Jemmy, the undercook. He bowed, as was proper, but then added with slight impropriety, “Mr. Rudge set it all up except for the dessert. But he’s had a mishap, and is sleeping now.”

There was a slight murmur of surprise around the table, followed by condolences and wishes for the cook’s speedy recovery in addition to praise for the young undercook. At a signal from Wilson, Jemmy withdrew.

“What a strange thing,” Lady Carletane commented. “You are bearing up remarkably well. I’m sure I should have been prostrate with the cook out of commission and a major dinner party planned.”

“That is what comes of having good, loyal staff,” the Duchess said affably. “In a pinch, they always come through.”

Darrius sighed inwardly. If his mother only knew the machinations he had gone through to obtain that loyal staff, or the indignities heaped upon his head as rejected workers were asked to leave for the most minute infractions. What would happen to this staff if he could not reverse the estate’s fortunes?

It was with difficulty, that he brought his attention back to the table conversation. “...looking for the lost heir,” he heard his mother saying. “Yes, there are handbills out all over the village, or so Mrs.

Swinton tells me. As you know, I don't make it out that often."

"It is true," Constable Morris remarked. "It would seem that Mr. Rutley wishes to establish a legitimate claim to Hillsworth so that he can have both the title and the fortune."

"Would it be worth a great deal?" Dr. Alton asked.

"Who knows?" the constable shrugged. "One thing is for sure, the grounds have grown shabby, and Rutley has difficulty keeping staff."

"Why is that, do you suppose?" Lord Carletane speculated.

"No idea," the constable said, "But I do know that there is a great deal of ill feeling toward him, and the feeling that he is not doing a good job as a caretaker."

"Dear me," the Duchess remarked. "It was such a showcase in its time."

Lord and Lady Carletane declined to stay for brandy, pleading the long drive home and the increasing chill of the evenings. The Duchess beamed a bright smile at each of the guests as they came forward to thank her for the meal, and say their goodbyes.

When all but Dr. Alton had departed, the Duchess prepared to return to her rooms. She groaned as she heaved her bulk upward and stood, swaying a little on her feet. Evelyn quickly went to her, and offered a hand for Her Grace to lean on.

"Thank you, my dear," the Duchess said. "I believe I should make an early night of it." Then she abruptly sat back down in her chair. "How humiliating. My feet do not wish to bear me up."

Dr. Alton quickly came forward. "May I examine them?" he asked.

"By all means!" the Duchess consented fervently.

The physician knelt at her feet, drawing up only as much of the ruffle as he needed to be able to see that her ankles were hugely swollen and her feet bulging out of her shoes.

“Let us have two of the footmen carry her to her rooms in her chair,” Dr. Alton said. “I believe she has had enough excitement for tonight.”

Evelyn hurried after the Duchess as she was carried to her rooms. What next? Was reconciling with her old friend too much for Her Grace? Was the stress of dealing with the loss of her favorite cook too much?

Chapter 32

Two shadowy figures met at the old stable.

“Are you pleased?” one asked the other.

“Your timing could have been better,” grumbled the first.

“Oh, no,” the second speaker smirked. “My timing was perfect. How else to make Rudge look incompetent?”

“No names here,” the first speaker reminded. “Nor is incompetent exactly the target. Besides, since when did a tumble down cellar steps indicate incompetence?”

“A failure to pay attention, or perhaps making too great haste on unstable footing,” suggested the second speaker.

“Perhaps. But how does this further my goals? My principle is expecting to have his problem removed, disposed of in some manner. Either frightened off or destroyed.”

“Best destroyed,” said the second speaker. “Scaring off is like putting a scarecrow in the fields and thinking that it will keep your crop safe.”

“Indeed. So how does your ploy further my goal, I ask again?”

“This is just the softening up stage. Just you wait and see. Your subject will be just as happy to disappear by the time I am through, and you’ll have no murder charge to withstand.”

“Murder?”

“What else do you call it? Death by mischance? Succumbing to evil

circumstance? As well to call a spade what it is rather than a digging implement.”

“I suppose,” sighed the first speaker. “It just seems so sordid when you put it like that.”

“Do you not find the whole thing more than a little sordid?”

“Enough!” said the first with authority. “The pace on this needs to pick up. Soon that young constable will be suspicious.”

“All the more reason to go quiet and easy,” said the second speaker. “But suit yourself. I’ll see to it that my hands are clean of the very least of it.”

“I’m sure you will. But I want it done and over before All Hallows so that we might enjoy the Christmas season without any trace of unease.”

The second speaker just laughed.

Chapter 33

Mayson sat on a tall-backed chair with his broken foot propped on another chair while Jemmy and Mr. McElroy scurried about the kitchen following his directions. Evelyn had just gone back upstairs to see to the Duchess.

Mayson blinked his eyes, forcing himself not to rub them, then returned to the interminable job of shelling dry peas. The hard, pebble-like things would be stored in sealed jars and used to make soups and stews throughout the winter.

Ordinarily, this would be a job given to a low-level kitchen worker or a staff member from some other part of the house. But Mayson found that forced inactivity wore on him. Relegated to a supervisory position, he found that shelling peas or peeling vegetables at least kept his hands busy.

“Jemmy, have a care there. I can smell those cakes,” Mayson fretted.

“Yessir, Mr. Rudge. I was just about to check them.”

Jemmy carefully opened small oven beside the big fireplace. Sure enough, the cakes were done to a turn. The young cook carefully pulled them out, one at a time, being careful not to jostle them lest they fall. This was his second try of the day, and the dinner hour was fast approaching.

It was almost as if everyone in the kitchen was holding their breath as the cakes landed safely on the table and held their shape as they started to cool.

Jemmy was just turning back to close the oven door, when the metal rack above the big cooling table made a strange groaning sound and fell directly upon the cooling table, narrowly missing Mayson where

he sat with the bowl full of peas.

Mr. McElroy came rushing in from the washing bench. “Thunder and lightning!” he shouted. “What the tarnation!”

“Jemmy,” Mayson called. “Are you hurt?”

“I am all right, Mr. Rudge,” Jemmy said, his voice wobbling up into a boy’s falsetto for just a moment. Then he swallowed audibly and asked, “What about you Mr. Mayson?”

“It missed me, but only just. Jemmy, I’m afraid your beautiful cakes are a casualty, however.”

“Don’t that just take all,” Jemmy growled.

“Nothin’ for it,” Mr. McElroy said. “We shall have to send down to the bakery in the village and hope they have some cake or biscuits that can be served. By the time we clear this up, there will not be enough time to bake another.”

“And they turned out good, too,” Jemmy sighed. He was not crying, but the disappointment was clear in his voice.

“You have the experience,” Mayson comforted him. “The next time, it will be easier. Call up to Mr. Wilson, and ask for some footmen to help clear this up. It is fortunate that there were lids on the pots and that the roasting hens are still in the ovens.”

“Oh, Lor...” Jemmy swore. “I near forgot them.” He opened the oven door, revealing two beautifully browned birds. “Where can I put them? Everything is all over dust in here.”

“The big drying table in the washroom,” Mr. McElroy said quickly. “I just cleared it. We can throw a cloth over them to keep the dust off.”

Quickly Jemmy and Mr. McElroy moved to do just that.

Evelyn came dashing down the steps. “We heard a crash upstairs. Is everything...?”

She stopped speaking as she saw the big metal rack and all the large

pots, pans, and kitchen implements lying on the central table and the floor. "Oh, my! Is everyone all right? Is anyone hurt?"

"Only the cakes," Jemmy said, with grim humor. "They turned out prime, too."

"Oh, Jemmy!" Evelyn gave a little laugh of relief. "I am so sorry. I know it was your second try today, and that the first batch fell. But... do you still have the first go? We do not have guests tonight, and I know the Duchess will understand."

Wilson, who had been on his way down in response to the bell, stopped aghast at the door. "Oh, my word! Is anyone hurt?"

"No, no one hurt. But, Mr. Wilson, could we get some of the footmen down here to help with clearing up?"

"Of course. I'll summon them at once. Did you manage to salvage any part of dinner?"

"Fortunately, we had not started preparing dinner for service, so it is mostly still in the pots awaiting the dishing up," Mayson explained. "Jemmy and Mr. McElroy put the roasting hens on the drying rack in the washing room, so they are safe enough for now."

"Excellent," said Mr. Wilson, quickly taking charge of the situation. "Mrs. Swinton, please go tell the Duchess that everyone is safe, but that dinner might be slightly delayed. How fortunate that it is only the Duchess and the staff tonight. We can improvise without fear of embarrassing Her Grace."

With one regretful glance at Mayson, Evelyn turned and hurried back up the stairs.

"The cakes were crushed," Jemmy told Mr. Wilson in despairing tones.

"Oh, lad," the butler cracked a stiff smile, "If crushed cakes are the worst that comes of this, I shall count us well off. Do you still have the ones that fell?"

"Sir?" Jemmy responded in puzzlement.

"I've helped rescue more than one fallen cake," Mr. Wilson said. "We shall clear up this mess, and I'll send the youngest footman down to the village to arrange for a workman to come repair the damages on the morrow. It is a shame about the cakes, especially if they turned out well. But I can promise you that I sampled your earlier efforts, and while not a thing of beauty, your first go was still delicious."

"Was it, Mr. Wilson?"

"It was," Mr. Wilson said firmly, tipping Mayson a wink.

Mayson nearly fell out of his chair. This was a side of Mr. Wilson he had never seen, not in the several months he had worked at the Dower House.

Then Mayson stopped and thought for a moment. He had not needed the kind of coaching that Jemmy was now receiving because the old cook who had sheltered him had readily taught his craft to the frightened, lonely boy that he had been.

But Mr. Wilson had never been anything but kind to the staff. Stern, yes, that he certainly was. Stiff, formal, adhering to correctness in all things, but never deliberately or needlessly unkind. Why should it be a surprise, then, that he would support the efforts of a boy who was just beginning to learn an exacting craft?

Mayson made up his mind right then that he liked Mr. Wilson. He had never disliked him, but had accepted the spare, ever-correct butler in much the same way that he accepted the ovens and the stones beneath his feet. Perhaps that is how a butler should be, he thought, a foundation and support for the rest of the staff. But it was good to know that there was something more to Mr. Wilson.

"Let us get Mr. Rudge a little farther away from the mess so the footmen can clean up," Mr. Wilson suggested. "Jemmy, can you support him while I move the chair? The two of you are more of a size than he and I. I fear I might drop him."

"I can stand," Mayson protested, at the same time that Jemmy said, "Of course, Mr. Wilson. I'll be glad to."

Between the two of them, Mayson found himself shifted away from the disaster and was just getting settled back in his seat when Evelyn

came hurrying back down the stairs, a little breathless from running up and down.

“Have a care, Mrs. Swinton,” cautioned Mr. Wilson. “It has not been that many days since you had a cast on your foot. Let us not have two invalids on our hands.”

“I’m not...” Mayson started to protest.

But Evelynn laughed. “I will be careful, Mr. Wilson.”

“Indeed, I have said as much to her,” said Mrs. Henshaw, following close behind with a troop of footmen and a gaggle of maids trailing after her. “Dear me! The whole assembly has come loose from the beams,” she exclaimed.

“I came to say that the Duchess has said that a late dinner is perfectly fine, but to keep her apprised of the event as it unfolds,” Evelyn explained. “How fortunate that we do not have guests tonight.”

“Quite so,” corroborated Mrs. Henshaw. “With the Duchess’ understanding, it will be a simple matter to manage a meal for staff. We shall simply prepare a meal for the Duchess and then set up a buffet in the servants’ dining hall so that staff can eat as they have time. I fear this might be a busy night for all of us with this recent upset. Mr. Wilson, I have taken the liberty of sending for the constable.”

“You do not think that this is not merely a mischance caused by wear on an aging edifice?” asked Mr. Wilson in some surprise.

“I do not,” Mrs. Henshaw replied firmly. “If you will recall, the supporting beams and the chains holding up the rack were replaced just last year. So I think we should wait until after dinner to clear up.”

“I had forgotten about that,” Mr. Wilson said. “I fear I am becoming as forgetful as Mr. Sparks.”

Just then Betty hurried down the stairs in the wake of all the other maids and footmen. “Begging your pardon, Mrs. Henshaw, Mr. Wilson, Her Grace requests that Mr. Rudge and Mrs. Swinton be brought upstairs to dine with her. She is certain that they will only be underfoot, and running themselves ragged down here, and she does

not wish to dine alone. Mr. Wilson, Mrs. Henshaw, you are invited, too.”

“Goodness!” declared Mrs. Henshaw. “We are becoming most egalitarian.”

“Perhaps not so revolutionary as all that,” Mr. Wilson demurred. “Her Grace has always been a law unto herself. Jemmy is a shade young to preside over the servants’ table. Mr. McElroy, as senior in age of all the staff, will you do the honors?”

“I would be glad to, Mr. Wilson. And I am cognizant of the honor you do me, since I am newest and least in seniority.”

“Molly Sue and Bruce, the head footman, will assist you. Valiant though you are in your efforts to keep our kitchen spotless, we are all aware of your difficulty with stairs. Molly Sue, Bruce,” Mr. Wilson fixed them both with a steely glare.

“Yes, Mr. Wilson,” they replied in chorus, Molly Sue curtsying, and Bruce giving a perfectly correct bow.

Mr. Wilson nodded an acknowledgement of their propriety, then directed two of the footmen to make a chair of their arms and carry Mr. Rudge up the narrow stairs and into the Duchess’ drawing room.

“Ah, there you are, Mr. Rudge,” the Duchess exclaimed. “I have quite missed your visits on the occasions when my tea tray was too laden for Mrs. Swinton to carry it. Settle him right there in the wingback chair. Pull the ottoman over for his foot. Excellent! You are both gentlemen of the first water. Now, go along about your business. I am sure that Mrs. Henshaw and Mr. Wilson will be along shortly with our dinners, and that they will make arrangements for yours.”

Thus summarily dismissed the two footmen hastened away, leaving the Duchess in the company of her companion and her cook.

“Well, Mr. Rudge,” the Duchess declared. “It would seem as if you are extremely accident prone of late. One does wonder about it. And I directed Mrs. Henshaw to send for the constable right away. Unless the workmen did an exceptionally poor job of repairing it, there should have been no reason for it to come down.”

Mayson glanced at Evelyn who hid a smile by bending her head over her needlework, which she had taken up as soon as she sat down in her customary chair. Clearly, the Duchess' memory was a great deal better than Mr. Wilson's.

In a short while, Mrs. Henshaw and Mr. Wilson brought up the dinner trays. They were just setting them down on the drawing room table when Bruce, who as senior footman was Mr. Wilson's understudy, tapped on the frame of the Duchess' drawing room door.

"Yes, Bruce?" Mr. Wilson asked.

"Constable Morris is here, Mr. Wilson. Should I send him up?"

"Take him to the kitchen first," the Duchess said. "Then invite him to join us. I think there is enough food here to feed an army. I do believe that young Jemmy is attempting to follow in your footsteps, Mr. Rudge."

"I would be pleased to think that I am having a positive influence over him, Your Grace," Mayson replied. "But he bade fair to become a good cook before he was promoted. We have simply made it possible for him to continue learning the trade. I have been pleased with him. He is earnest, and tries hard, frequently to good effect."

"I am pleased to hear it," The Duchess smiled happily at them all. "It is always a pleasure when a plan works out well. But we must get to the bottom of these accidents. A loose stone in those old cellar steps I can well believe. I remember that they were in sad condition when the late Duke and I were wed. But for a kitchen rack, so recently repaired, to come down! That is negligence, at the very least of it, and if such is the case the workmen shall hear of it, I can assure you."

"I should not wish to be in their shoes," Mrs. Henshaw ventured conversationally. "Our Mr. Rudge was nearly squashed by the thing."

"As it was, poor Jemmy's successful cakes fell victim to it. But I can promise you," Mr. Wilson went on, "That even though his first cakes fell flat, they are still delicious. The boy has a definite flair for desserts."

"Perhaps because he is fond of eating them," Evelyn commented. "Which is not to belittle his success. Where might we have been if he

had not already been training as undercook?"

"In the soup for sure," Mayson quipped.

"No, no," the Duchess protested. "My son would have sent one of the cooks down from the main estate. Although I must say I am just as well pleased that it was not necessary. The last time we had the undercook from Darrius's household, the fellow was competent but had no imagination at all, no sense of presentation."

"Goodness," Evelyn remarked. She might have said more, but just then Bruce announced Constable Morris.

The expression on the constable's face was very grim indeed.

Chapter 34

Evelyn felt as if her heart had stopped at the expression on Constable Morris's face.

"Come in, come in," the Duchess invited him. "Sit down with us, and tell us what you have found."

"I cannot be sure of the motive or who was intended to be harmed, but it was definitely foul play," Constable Morris said grimly, sitting down on one of the spindly occasional chairs. "There were bright cut marks on all four of the supporting chains. They were placed in such a way that as the chains heated and cooled throughout the day, they would break, causing the rack to fall."

The Duchess set down her glass, although she had been about to take a sip. "That is dreadful! I cannot imagine why anyone would do such a thing."

"No more can I," Constable Morris said heavily. "It is the kind of thing that is often done by disgruntled workers. Have you turned anyone off recently? Had occasion to reprimand anyone?"

"Only Mr. Sparks," the Duchess said. "I pensioned him off a little over a month ago. The poor old soul kept falling asleep next to the hearth and having to be rescued before he fell into the coals."

"He was sent to live with his daughter, who receives a nice stipend for looking after him, and he is given a few pence each week to spend at the inn. Word has it that he delights in telling stories, gossiping, and playing dice in the evenings, so I cannot imagine how he would feel himself to be badly used."

"Stranger things have happened," Constable Morris said. "No other problems with the staff? No one pinching the silver, that sort of

thing?”

“Definitely not,” Mr. Wilson said firmly. “We run a tight ship here. The staff is small, as is only right with our lovely Duchess as the only peer in residence, and works very well together. Aside from having to rescue Mrs. Swinton and Mr. Rudge from their troubles, we have had no incidents at all.”

“What else has happened?” asked Constable Morris.

The Duchess quickly explained about the chair leg that had caused Evelyn to endure a broken foot, and Mr. Rudge’s tumble down the cellar stairs. As he listened, the constable’s face took on an expression of increased gravity.

At the end of the narration, he said, “Clearly, someone intends harm to your staff, Your Grace, and possibly, by extension, to you. This is a matter to be taken very seriously. Have you hired on anyone new recently?”

“Only Mr. McElroy. He was hired to replace Jemmy as potboy.”

“Could this Mr. McElroy be the cause of the trouble?”

“I would scarcely think so,” Mayson put in. “He was wounded in Africa during the recent war. Because he has a wooden leg and his face is horribly scarred, he has a hard time getting employment. I have found him to not only be willing, but eager to work.”

“Resentment can spring in strange places,” the constable pointed out. “But I will own that it does seem unlikely. Military man and all, it stands to reason that he would understand discipline and duty.”

“Will you take dinner with us?” the Duchess asked, gesturing at the abundance of food laid out on the drawing room table. “It is the least we can do, having gotten you out so late in the day.”

“I should say no,” Constable Morris said, surveying the food spread out on the table. “But this all looks incredibly good. Is this young Jemmy’s work?”

“It is,” Mr. Rudge said. “I am currently relegated to sitting in a corner

giving directions while shelling peas to keep my hands out of mischief.”

The constable’s lips twitched, but he did not smile or laugh. “A dire fate,” he said. “But one that might have saved you from harm. You were too far away from the rack for it to fall on you. It is good luck that Jemmy had turned away to the ovens just then. As large as the thing is, I believe you have gotten off lightly with only two cakes as casualties.”

“Perhaps so,” Mayson sighed. “But it feels all wrong for it to have happened in my kitchen, this kitchen in particular. It curdles the stomach to think that someone is so resentful or angry as to try engineer such an accident.”

“It does you credit that you feel that way, Mr. Rudge,” the constable said. “Unfortunately, the kind of person who will do this sort of thing is rarely rational. It makes no sense to us, but to a deranged mind it might seem perfectly logical. Nonetheless, I will send up to London for a couple of fellows I know and can trust. They will be free of local prejudices and associations, and will therefore be more impartial in their investigations.”

“That is a great deal of trouble,” the Duchess started to say.

“No trouble at all, Your Grace,” the constable replied. “They are simply sitting around drinking, er, tea and playing the occasional game of darts. It will do them good to bestir themselves, and get a little country air into their citified lungs.”

“If you are certain,” the Duchess said.

“I am,” Constable Morris said. “I am only one man, Your Grace, and willing as I am to investigate, I think this would go more smoothly if I had some assistance.”

“Very well,” the Duchess acquiesced. “But you must let us compensate them for their time.”

“Not to worry, Your Grace. I believe there is a fund for that which is part of my office.”

“To be sure there is. I had forgotten about that,” the Duchess said.

“How foolish of me.”

Evelyn noticed that Mayson stared at the constable for a moment, but Constable Morris dug into his dinner as if he had said nothing unusual.

Evelyn could almost hear the thoughts that must be running through Mayson's head.

If the Duchess remembered repairs having been made on the rack in the kitchen, how likely was it that she would forget about a special fund for hiring extra constables?

Surely, mentioning the fund must be a code for something else, for the Duchess made no further comment on it.

The Duchess turned the conversation to their meal, praising the various dishes, especially the roasted chicken. She even commented that the cake, although not as fluffy as usual, had good flavor.

Mr. Wilson beamed at that, saying, “This is the cake our Jemmy made before he made the pair that were squashed flat by the rack. It is a shame that no one ever got to taste them, for they had perfect form and appeared to be light and fluffy.”

“It is said that practice makes perfect, so if our young undercook produced two creditable cakes today, no doubt he will be able to repeat the performance at some future time.”

“One would think so,” Mayson said. “I have every confidence in his ability and his willingness to learn. There is every indication that he will soon become a good cook, and will become even better as he applies his skills. He had already been doing many of the tasks that Mr. Sparks should rightly have undertaken.”

“Should we understand, then, that Mr. Sparks was somewhat in his dotage?”

“Precisely,” Mayson said. “He was not a bad fellow, but his wits had begun to wander. His daughter is happy to have him home.”

“It is a real puzzle, that is for sure,” Constable Morris said. “No one

with a motive, no angry former staff member. But more investigation is likely to bring something to light.”

“It is to be hoped,” said the Duchess. “I cannot have my household continuously in an uproar.”

“Quite so,” the constable agreed. “Thank you so much for the delicious dinner, Your Grace. Mr. Rudge, do tell your young undercook that he is coming along famously and might soon rival his mentor. If you will excuse me, Your Grace, I shall toddle along and make some inquiries in various places. Hopefully, someone will have an idea as to what is going on. No need to get up, Mr. Wilson, I can see myself out.”

With that, the constable went his way. By then, everyone was exhausted, so it was not long before the same two stout footmen carried Mayson back downstairs to bed.

Evelyn did the clearing up, sending the trays of dirty dishes off with the maids. She helped the Duchess retire to her bed, then retreated to staff territory. She looked in on Mayson, but he was already fast asleep, so she went to her room and prepared for bed.

As she stared up into the darkness, Evelyn wondered why these things were happening. There simply did not seem to be any logical reason for any of it. Yet it all seemed to center around the kitchen, and Mayson. There is a connection there, she thought.

If I could just put the pieces together.

Chapter 35

Evelyn awoke with a sense of unease. It was still pitch black, and the house was very still. Something was not right.

Evelyn swung her feet out of her bed, pushing them into her soft house slippers. She then shrugged into her robe, and walked quietly to the door. That was when she smelled smoke.

Evelyn hurried out of her room, and hastened down the hall, pounding on doors as she passed to rouse the household.

Mr. Wilson met her at the head of the stairs leading down to the kitchen. Thick smoke coiled up the stairwell.

“Mayson!” Evelyn cried out, flying down the stairs as fast as her feet would carry her. When she pushed her way into the kitchen, she beheld a macabre sight.

A large chunk of something unidentifiable hung from the roasting spit. Jemmy was sprawled on the floor, his hair perilously near the flames in the fireplace. The fire, instead of burning low as was customary at night, blazed ferociously, while thick smoke billowed out from it and filled the room.

Mr. McElroy hitched himself along on his side, making a valiant effort to pull Jemmy away from the conflagration.

Evelyn ran to help Mr. McElroy while Mr. Wilson ran to the washing up trough, where he scooped up a huge pot of water. He staggered back with it and poured it over the burning mass in the fireplace, causing it to hiss and sputter before going out.

Although the immediate danger was quelled, thick clouds of smoke

and steam continued to billow through the kitchen.

"I'll check on Mayson," Evelyn said, hastening to the door of his small sleeping chamber.

Here, she was horrified to find another smoldering mass, this one on Mayson's bedside rug. The small room was filled with smoke, and flames were beginning to lick at the edge of the bedspread.

Evelyn whipped the coverlet off the bed, tamping it down on the smoldering mess on the rug. Deprived of air, the fire went out, but the thick clouds of smoke continued to waft from the bundle of charred fabric.

Bruce entered, carrying a large pot of water, dumping it over the smoking mass on the floor. This added billows of steam to the thick smoke.

Evelyn began to cough, tears streaming down her face, but she hurried to Mayson. He seemed to be heavily asleep, his breathing labored and harsh.

Mr. Wilson, and another footman hurried after Bruce. "It is the smoke," Mr. Wilson said. "Let us have him up and out of here."

Not bothering to wait for the other footman, Mr. Bruce pulled Mayson into a sitting position, and slung him up over his shoulder. He staggered a bit under the weight, but managed to get himself and Mayson out the door, then out the back kitchen door into the cleaner outside air. Evelyn, the other footman, and Mr. Wilson hurried after them.

They were met at the back door by the head gardener and the head stableman who helped ease Mayson down onto the ground.

"He's heavier than he looks," Bruce commented. "Solid, too, not like most cooks."

Evelyn scarcely paid him any heed at all, kneeling down beside Mayson. "Someone send for Dr. Alton," she cried.

Mrs. Henshaw appeared at her elbow with a basin of water and a soft

cloth. "Turn him on his side so that he does not choke," she directed. "Then bathe his face, especially around the nose. It won't help what's already gone inside, but it will help clear the remains from his face and perhaps wake him up."

Evelynn did as she was directed, silently weeping as she wiped the smoke stains from Mayson's face. Dip, wring, wipe, repeat. Until Mayson stirred with a groan, and caught Evelyn's hand.

"What is happening?" he asked. "Why am I outside?"

"Someone tried to set fire to the kitchen and to your room," Evelyn replied. "I was afraid that you were not going to wake up." She gulped back a sob, and tried to smile.

"Would it matter to you?" Mayson asked.

"So very much," Evelyn replied, sniffing. She wiped a hand across her face, smearing tears and soot.

Mayson caught her hand, and offered her back the cloth she had been using on his face. "Evelyn," he said softly. "Is anyone nearby?"

Evelyn looked around. Most people were focused on getting the smoke out of the kitchen and cleaning up the mess from the fires.

"Not at the moment," she said. "Why?"

"I think I know what is going on," he said. "I spoke with my friend, the magistrate, about proving that I am the rightful heir. I thought I had been discreet, but someone must have discovered that I am attempting to take up my inheritance."

Evelyn sucked in a deep breath. "You think you are the target?"

He nodded. "It makes sense. The chair that broke is the one that I usually sit in. If I had not become restless and pushed away from the table, I would have been under that iron rack. The cellar steps were greased and someone had loosened a stone. Now this. I need to leave, Evelyn, before someone gets hurt."

"But where will you go? What will you do?" Evelyn asked.

“For right now, he is not going anywhere or doing anything,” Dr. Alton said firmly, “Except to one of the upstairs rooms where the air is not filled with smoke. If you do not develop pneumonia from this night’s work, Mr. Rudge, it will be a miracle.”

Dr. Alton knelt down on the other side of Mayson, and began listening to his chest, using an ear trumpet.

“There’s a rattle in there that I do not like,” the physician commented. “No, no, do not try to get up. We will pad a table and use that to carry you up to one of the guest chambers. Constable Morris has some men coming from London. In the meanwhile, two watchers will be at your door day and night. We will have no more of this nonsense.”

“How is Jemmy?” Evelyn asked.

“He will do. He will have quite a headache tomorrow, but he is in better shape than Mr. Rudge. Meanwhile, the Duke is sending two cooks down from the main estate to man the kitchens since we are now down three helpers.”

“Three?” Evelyn squeaked.

“Three,” Dr. Alton confirmed. “Someone managed to make off with Mr. McElroy’s wooden leg, and added it to the fire in the kitchen.”

“That is dreadful!” Evelyn exclaimed. “How could anyone be so full of anger or hate as to burn a one-legged man’s wooden leg?”

“It is an amazing thing how many bitter, angry people there are in the world,” Dr. Alton replied, not at all unkindly. “Ah, here are the footmen, the gardener, and the stableman with the table-top. We shall have you up to a guest room and more comfortable before you know it, Mr. Rudge. Mrs. Henshaw has directed the maids to put a tin bathtub in your guest quarters, and we shall have that soot off you and you into a fresh nightshirt. No, no, do not protest. We must have the miasma from that room off you so that you can breathe more easily.”

Evelyn started to follow the men carrying Mr. Rudge.

“Bide a moment,” Mr. Alton said. “I caught a little of what Mr. Rudge was telling you, but I assure you that I will keep it in confidence. But

because of it, we will keep a guard on his room. It is just bad luck that this should all happen before the men that Constable Morris has requested have come from London.”

“Thank you for keeping still about it,” Evelyn said. “He is worried that he is the cause of all these things.”

“I’ll not deny they seem to center around him,” Dr. Alton agreed. “But he is scarcely the cause. As you pointed out, it takes someone who is truly depraved to create an incident such as this. Had you not awoken the house, you could all have been burned alive in your beds.”

“That certainly seems excessive for keeping someone from claiming their inheritance,” Evelyn said, giving a little shudder.

“Indeed it does,” the physician agreed. “Go, get yourself cleaned up, and visit with the Duchess, who is, no doubt, in a nervous fervor over this. When we have Mr. Rudge all clean and in his bed, you can come in and see him. By then, I vow, the Duchess will be able to spare you to sit with him for a time.”

“But...” Evelyn started to protest.

“No, no, do as I ask, Mrs. Swinton. The Duchess is upset, and I would prefer not to have two invalids on my hands this day.”

“Very well,” Evelyn agreed. She went to her room and shivered through washing her hands and face, then changing into a clean chemise, petticoats, and a simple day gown. She had to own that she felt far more capable than she had a few minutes before, and mentally thanked Dr. Alton for his kindness.

When she went to the Duchess, she found that she was, indeed, in quite a state. Betty was with her, looking the worse for wear with a smudge of soot on her nose, and her normally pristine cap eschew.

“I am here, Betty,” Evelyn said.

“How is he, Mrs. Swinton?” the Duchess asked at once. “How are all of them?”

“Mr. Rudge was awake and talking when I last saw him, Your Grace.

According to Dr. Alton, Jemmy has escaped with nothing worse than an aching head. Mr. McElroy was uninjured except for straining his weak arm, but will have difficulty getting about until someone makes him a new leg.”

“Such dreadful, dreadful goings on!” the Duchess exclaimed. “Betty, thank you, child. You have done very well. Go get cleaned up, and get some rest. Mrs. Swinton will do for me now.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Betty acquiesced, curtsied, and departed.

“How is he, really?” the Duchess asked.

“I am not sure, Your Grace. It is certain that he swallowed a great deal of smoke. Dr. Alton looked very grave, but wants to get him into a warm bath and get all the smoky garments off him. Mr. Wilson has placed him in one of the guest chambers. Is that all right?”

“Perfectly fine,” the Duchess replied. “It would be difficult to care for him in one of the servant rooms. I have no idea why they were made so small. George and I often spoke of making them larger. But it takes a great deal of money to make changes in a house this old.”

“Did you always live here?” Evelyn asked, hoping to take the older lady’s mind off the near-tragedy that had just occurred.

“Not always,” the Duchess smiled. “We lived in the Main House when we were first married, and George’s mother lived here until her death. She was a stern old lady, very proper. She and Mrs. Henshaw got on a treat. It was very awkward for me, because Mrs. Henshaw, to this day, does not always remember that I am not her youthful charge.”

“That is the problem with those who remember us as children,” Evelyn agreed. “But there is no one I would rather have about in an emergency. She always knows just what needs to be done.”

“Well, well,” the Duchess gave a little laugh, “She has had plenty of practice at looking after me and mine. She was my nurse, then my personal maid, then she was Darrius’s nurse until he grew old enough to need a manservant and tutor instead. How is she holding up under all of this?”

“Admirably,” Evelyn replied. “While Mr. Wilson and the footmen dealt

with the fire and smoke, she was busy organizing a padded table and a room for Mr. Rudge. Now, what can I do for you, Your Grace? I know this is well past your usual bedtime.”

“Well, we can hardly send down to the kitchen for tea, now can we?” The Duchess made a grim attempt at humor.

“No, indeed. But it is just possible that Mrs. Henshaw has some tea brewing somewhere. Shall I call her?”

The Duchess gave a nod, almost like a frightened child who truly does need her nanny.

In just a few minutes, Mrs. Henshaw appeared, looking as pristine and calm as ever. At Evelyn’s inquiry, she smiled. “To be sure, we do have some tea brewing in the servants’ dining hall. And Mr. Wilson has some spices put by in the butlery. Dr. Alton is still in the house, so I shall ask him if you can have something a little stronger to help you sleep.”

With that, the housekeeper went off to make inquiries. Evelyn went about the room, tidying up various bits of this and that, straightening tables and clearing off the tea table.

In good time, Mrs. Henshaw came back with a tea tray laden with a teapot, a tray of biscuits, and a bottle of red wine.

“Dr. Alton recommended a bit of wine and some wafers,” Mrs. Henshaw explained. “Just put the tray with the service into the hall when you are finished with it, Mrs. Swinton, and someone will come for you when Mr. Rudge is made tidy and tucked into bed.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Henshaw,” Evelyn said. As she poured the tea and a glass of wine for the Duchess, she worried and fretted, but tried to keep her fears off her face. As Dr. Alton had said, it would not be an advantage to have two invalids to look after.

Chapter 36

Bruce and one of the other footmen acted as body servants for Mayson. He found himself efficiently divested of his smoke-stained nightwear, and gently lowered into a tub of warm water where he was briskly, but not unkindly, scrubbed from one end to the other.

The steam from the water began to clear his head, and by the time they had him settled between clean sheets in the wide bed of the guest chamber, he was feeling far wider awake and alert.

Dr. Alton settled on one edge of the bed, listened to his chest through an ear trumpet, took out a large watch, and held his thumb on his wrist while he counted under his breath.

"Now then, my boy," Dr. Alton said, "You'll be going nowhere for a time. You will have pleurisy of this, if not pneumonia. But in just a few minutes, you would have had worse if not for Mrs. Swinton's quick thinking. Indeed, were it not for her, in a few minutes, the village would have been up here doing a bucket brigade and come morning, we'd have been sifting the ashes for your bones."

"What if there are other traps?" Mayson asked.

"Bruce and the other footmen are searching the house from cellar to attic to discover that very thing, Mr. Rudge. We'll have no more of this tonight."

"And tomorrow?" Mayson asked.

"Tomorrow, we shall see. I caught a little of what you were telling Mrs. Swinton. If you left home for the reasons I am thinking on, then you surely knew this would not be easy."

"I knew that," Mayson replied. "But I did not think it would go so far as to endanger others."

Dr. Alton sighed. "No more did anyone else. And considering the state of a certain place, I am sure that you had the best intent. But we scarcely know what our actions might put in motion."

Mayson sighed, and said nothing.

Dr. Alton patted his arm. "You rest easy now tonight. Let others see to things. I will go see the Duchess now, and send Mrs. Swinton in to see you. If I do not, she will fret herself into a fever, I doubt not."

With that, the physician let himself out of the room, leaving Mayson to look about him in the gloom. A small fire crackled on the hearth behind a screen, emitting a pleasant aroma of good oak wood. The candle on the nightstand beside the bed smelled of beeswax and vanilla. No tallow candles or warmed bricks for this room. It was intended for honored guests.

Perhaps not highly honored guests, Mayson thought. Though what he could see of the room was pleasant, it was small. Better than what I or any of the other servants have. There is something amiss with that.

But his ruminations went no further than that, for the door opened and Evelyn slipped in. She pulled a straight-backed chair up beside his bed and sat in it, putting out her hand for his. "Oh, Mayson! I thought I had lost you."

"While I was doing no thinking at all. Evelyn, I fear I have set something dreadful in motion."

She shook her head in denial. "Not you, Mayson. The person who intends you harm has set something in motion. Could this be your uncle's doing?"

"Perhaps. Although I would not think that he would risk involving others. He never did before."

"Evelyn, I have been thinking. If I were to let go of my inheritance, let go of it officially, the funds would go to my uncle. It is all he wants, I think. If I did that, then you and I could go to New South Wales, and begin a life that has nothing to do with any of this."

Evelynn clasped his hand in both of hers and drew his fingers to her lips. "Oh, Mayson, I am touched that you would even think such a thing. But what of the people on the estate? What of the way he has treated them?"

Mayson freed his other hand from the covers, and captured her hands in his. He pulled her hands to him, placing a gentle kiss on her knuckles. "That is a thing, is it not?" he said, cradling her hands against his face. "But if I take up my inheritance, I will be expected to wed a lady of my station and beget a bevy of high-born children to carry on the Name."

"Then I will go with you to your household, in whatever capacity you need. Do not fear that you will lose me, Mayson."

"In any capacity?" Mayson looked at her, searching her face for any flinching or withdrawing.

"Any capacity," she said firmly. "I do understand the ways of the world, My Lord Sacrificial Lamb."

At that Mayson laughed, and a merry smile lit up his face. "Then we shall astonish the world, Mrs. Absolutely Willing, for I would have you to wife, and be hanged to the opinion of the world."

"Mayson!" she said softly, in astonishment.

"Do not think I have not seen the look on your face these weeks past. I know that you have been prepared to give me up. But I will not have it, do you hear? I want no other, nor do I wish to share you with someone else just to make you secure. I have seen how these arrangements work out, and I would rather defy society than risk you to an arranged marriage of dubious quality."

"Whatever makes you think I would submit to such a thing?" Evelyn asked. "I said I would serve you, not that I would serve any other."

"But what if there were children?" Mayson asked.

"What if there were? I know you would do your best for them, and they would have a trade and education."

“But what of a name?” Mayson asked. “Would you condemn them to doing without?”

“Oh, Mayson, there is more to life than a name. Besides, what if they were all daughters? Not every expectation produces a son.”

“Evelyn, Evelyn,” Mayson pulled her down to him. “It is all moot for I will not do this thing to you. I asked you some weeks ago if I might have you to wife, and you as good as said yes. Have you changed your mind?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Not exactly.”

“Then, what exactly?”

“I said yes to Mr. Rudge, the cook, not to...”

“Shhh,” he put his finger across her lips. “Do not say that name here. You never know who might be listening. Besides, I knew who I was when I asked. And I asked Mrs. Swinton, the beautiful, tragic, recent widow of Mr. John Swinton. I asked a lady of noble heart and great generosity such as I am unlikely to find anywhere.”

“But Mayson...”

Evelyn got out no further words, for Mayson wriggled himself up in the bed, cupped the back of her head in one hand, and pulled her in for a gentle, but deep and thorough kiss.

“Oh, my!” Evelyn said when he drew back. “Oh, Mayson.”

“I’ll not ask how that was in comparison to your dear departed,” he said, “for every man who marries a widow has a saint to follow after, but was it passable?”

“Oh, more than passable, Mayson. You make extremely cogent and unfair arguments, Mr. Rudge.”

Mayson lay back down on the pillows, and began coughing.

“Oh, dear, I have excited you too much!” Evelyn exclaimed, rising hurriedly and crossing the small room for the pitcher of water on the

washstand.

She poured a glass for him, and brought it back, along with a cloth.

He spat into the cloth, and was no little astonished when she opened it and inspected his sputum. "Flecks of black," she said. "No doubt from that horrid smoke, but no tinge of blood."

"That is a good thing?" he asked.

"That is a very good thing," she said, deliberately neglecting to mention the greenish tinge that indicated infection. She set the cloth aside to show Dr. Alton when he next visited.

"I will ring for someone to bring you some wine," she said. "You need to sleep, not fret yourself about tomorrow. I will sit with you, so that no one will disturb you."

"But what of you?" Mayson asked. "Do you not need rest?"

"Oh, Mayson," Evelyn said tenderly, smoothing back his hair. "You are my rest."

Resting against the pillows, Mayson leaned his face against her hands. *This is home. This is what I need.*

Chapter 37

The next several days were busy ones for Evelyn. The Duchess had developed a bad case of gout, and although the cooks the Duke sent from the Main House were more than adequate, they were certainly not up to Mayson's standards. Nor were they willing to manage the small, late night repasts the Duchess enjoyed.

Mayson, just as Dr. Alton had predicted, developed a rattle in his lungs. The physician ordered him to bed, and refused to listen to any pleas that Mayson be allowed up.

In consequence, on this particular evening, Evelyn was baking an apple and carefully toasting bread over the coals of the Duchess' fireplace.

"That apple does smell good," the Duchess remarked. "And so does the toasting bread. Do you suppose that by having others prepare our food, we are missing out on part of the joys of dining?"

Evelyn gave a polite little laugh. "It is certain that this meal will not be cold before you can partake of it. How fortunate that there is fresh butter and strawberry jam." She rose from where she knelt on the hearth, her cheeks flushed from the heat of the coals.

"Oh, that does smell delicious," the Duchess said. "And the tea will be piping hot, as well. We should do this more often, Mrs. Swinton."

Evelyn forced a smile. "I think you would find my cooking tedious after a time, Your Grace."

And I need to get back to Mayson. Never before have I appreciated the difficulty of washer women and barmaids who have families.

“Perhaps.” The Duchess bit into the toasted bread. “But I think these simple meals are made better by the company. It is too bad that Mr. Rudge cannot join us.”

“Oh, you are too shrewd, Your Grace.” Now Evelyn’s laugh was genuine.

“My dear, I know what it is to love. And I know what it is to fear for a loved one who is ill. I am sorry to be such an old crosspatch as to insist upon your company. But, in truth, the maids fret me. Come sit with me, and have a cup of tea before you go back to Mr. Rudge. Are you sleeping at all?”

“I’ve caught a few winks. Mr. Bruce sits with Mr. Rudge, and so does Mr. McElroy. But Mr. McElroy is limited in what he can do until the carpenter completes his leg.”

“Such a shame that someone would be so petty as to burn the peg-leg of a one-legged man. It is a miracle that he is getting about at all.”

“He does well with his crutches, but they do not leave his hands free to carry things about. Moreover, while he was trying to move Jemmy away from the hearth, he strained the arm he broke that was newly-healed when he came to work here.”

“Such a noble spirit in that tortured body.”

“I think so,” Evelynn replied. “But there are many who do not see beyond the scarring and the sightless eye.”

“I do not understand the ways of people sometimes,” the Duchess said. “But I will own that had it not been for Mr. Rudge, we probably would have turned him away. Yet he not only gave as good a service as many an able-bodied man, but he also risked himself to save Jemmy.”

The two of them ate in silence for a few minutes. Then the Duchess said, “I note that Bruce has become Mr. Bruce of late.”

“He has earned it,” Evelyn said. “Mr. Wilson has confirmed that he is grooming him to become a butler.”

“Perhaps at least one good thing will come of all this turmoil.”

“Perhaps. But I think he would soon be moving up anyway. He is already the lead footman.”

“So he is. Well, my dear, you have borne with me admirably. If you will but help me into bed, I will not take it amiss if you go to Mr. Rudge. Let me know if there is any change.”

Evelyn lent her shoulder to the Duchess so that the older lady could hobble her way from chair to bed on her swollen feet. The Duchess sank down on the edge of her wide bed with a sigh of relief.

“Someday, they will make an easier way for those who are crippled up with age or rheumatism to get about more easily.”

“No doubt they shall,” Evelyn soothed her. “But until that time, those of us who are still able must serve those who are not.”

The Duchess settled back on her pillows and Evelyn drew the covers up over her. “You are like an angel to me, Mrs. Swinton. Go now to your friend, the cook who has served up so many delectable dishes. I miss them. Tell him I miss my golden milk and that the fool my son sent me cannot make it fit to drink, so he must hurry and get well.”

The Duchess’ tone was light, but Evelyn heard the genuine concern behind the flippancy. “I will tell him, Your Grace. Good night.”

“Good night, Mrs. Swinton.”

Evelyn banked the fire, and made sure the fire screen was firmly in place. She turned down the nightlight, and giving a nod to the footman stationed outside the door, she hurried down the hall to the guest room where Mayson no doubt lay awake, waiting for her.

When she entered the room, she found that Mayson was awake. Mr. McElroy sat in a wingback chair beside the fireplace. The chair and the bed nearly filled the small room, but a straight-back chair sat in the niche between bed and nightstand, waiting for Evelyn. She sank down upon it, gratefully.

“How are you, Mayson?” she asked. But she could see it. Two hectic red patches glowed on his cheekbones, his eyes were fever bright and hollow.

“Evelyn,” he croaked. “What took you so long? I was worried about you.”

“I am here now, Mayson. The Duchess is having a bad time with her gout. She misses your cooking, and she misses our little chats. She even suggested that you dine with us.”

“Should we, then?” Mayson asked.

“I do not think it is a good idea,” Evelyn replied. “She is upset and in a certain amount of pain, and Dr. Alton does not want you out of bed for longer than it takes to use a chamber pot. Right now, Mr. McElroy has greater mobility than you.”

“Now that is unkind of you, Evelyn. Although I should be lonely these long days lying here without him.”

“Long days... it has been but three,” Evelyn protested, while Mr. McElroy said at the same time, “I was glad to do it. The time drags for me, too. I’ll be glad when the carpenter has me new leg.”

“Oh, the pair of you! One in bed, the other in a comfortable chair. I have been upstairs and down, reasoning with the cooks the Duke sent for his mother, and finally cooking her bedtime snack myself at her drawing room fireplace.”

Mayson began to cough into a large white handkerchief. He then blew his nose, and when he would have wiped his eyes on the same cloth, Evelyn handed him a fresh one. “Tank you,” he said, the nasal congestion gripping his usual clear diction.

Evelyn did not say anything, merely looked worried.

“Did Dr. Alton look in on you today?” she asked.

“He did, on both of us, and on Jemmy,” Mr. McElroy said. “He said to tell you he would be by in the morning, and not to fret yourself too much. He left some packets of tea for you to make up for Mr. Rudge, as well as a draught for the pain in my arm, and a pair of crutches for me.”

“How is Jemmy?” she asked.

“Fit as a fiddle, and chomping at the bit to be back in the kitchen. The physician wants him to wait another day, especially since he anticipates a fight between Jemmy and that pair of dunderheads the Duke sent to cook. He is hoping that both Her Grace and Mr. Rudge will soon be fit enough to send those cooks back to the estate manor.”

“Oh, dear,” Evelyn laughed a little. “It would seem that no one likes them. But small wonder. They tried to cook up a seven-course meal for Her Grace. Mr. Wilson had to speak with them very sternly about Dr. Alton’s directions for the Duchess.”

“Let me guess,” Mayson suggested, “They tried to make all her favorites for one meal?”

“That would have been bad enough,” Evelyn sighed, “but the lead cook wanted to make a steak and kidney pie. This, when Dr. Alton expressly forbade organ meats, and the entire household knows that she detests the dish. Apparently, it was the late Duke’s favorite and is this cook’s specialty.”

“What did you do?” Mr. McElroy asked, with great interest.

“Suggested that he make the dish for the staff, and requested fresh bread, apples and cheese for the Duchess. I roasted the apple before the fire, toasted the bread, and Her Grace and I had a simple repast. Oh, and tea. I made ordinary tea by the drawing room fire.”

“Good solution,” Mayson put in. “And I think you had the better meal. I did wonder when Mr. McElroy and I were served the pie. It might be this cook’s specialty, but I cannot compliment him on his crust or the gravy.”

“Oh, dear,” Evelyn laughed. “Should I make something for you?”

“Not to worry. Mr. Wilson slipped us a snack of bread, cheese, and apples, having given over most of the pie to the hound master who hoped that it would not give his pups indigestion.”

“Oh, dear. Whatever possessed the Duke to send us these two fellows? Surely he knows how important it is that his mother have the right foods.” Evelyn shook her head in disbelief.

“That is a good question,” Mayson replied. “I can scarcely credit it

myself.”

“Well, I think I’ll toddle off to bed,” Mr. McElroy said. “If you could just help me with the door, Mrs. Swinton?”

“Gladly,” Evelyn replied, as Mr. McElroy struggled up onto his one good leg with the aid of the crutches. “Will you need help at the other end?”

“With the door, I might.”

But when Evelyn opened the door, she found one of the footmen waiting. He volunteered not only to assist Mr. McElroy with the doors, but with any other thing he might need. “We reckon you saved Jammy,” the footman said. “We got into a lot of mischief together when we were boys. I’d be glad to do it in any case, but I’m especially happy to be of help for his sake.”

Relieved, Evelyn watched the two men, one young and hale, the other old and injured by life, make their way down the hall

Then she closed the door and resumed her seat beside Mayson. She picked up his hand, and held his knuckles to her lips. “What will become of us?” she murmured.

Mayson, who had been drowsing with his eyes closed, opened them and said, “I’ll not leave you, Evelyn. You are not sitting another death watch. I have been thinking. Maybe you are right about what would happen if I take up my title. Let us run away together. New South Wales would suit, or maybe some place in the Americas. What do you think?”

“I think I will go with you to the ends of the earth,” Evelyn replied. “It would be nice to have a destination so that I know what to pack.”

Mayson started to laugh, then began to cough again. When he lay back against his pillows, he looked pale and the red patches on his cheeks were brighter than ever. “Just let me get over this,” he said. “Then we will make our plans.”

Evelyn smoothed his hair back from his forehead. “I will wait as long as it takes,” she said.

When Mayson's breathing evened out, Evelyn collected up the soiled handkerchiefs. She checked the last one. The sputum was no longer flecked with black, but it was green as the moss on a stagnant swamp and smelled nearly as bad.

Am I, indeed, sitting at another deathbed?

Chapter 38

Darrius sat with Blanche in the large drawing room. A tea table was drawn up between them.

“So you are feeling better?” Darrius asked.

“Better, yes. Not as well as I would like. I might never be able to wear my stays tight or contemplate any powder or paint beyond a little flour or berry juice.”

“That does not seem like such a dreadful fate,” Darrius commented.

“Oh, Darrius, do you not understand? Only little girls who are playing at being grown up would use such things. No, I am better off to go about with my face bare, like some Protestant woman.”

Darrius studied her for a moment. “You find that repugnant?”

“Have you read their tracts, Darrius? I do, indeed, find it repugnant. I attend church like any other God-fearing citizen, but I do not spend my day agonizing over whether the things I have done are sin. I take it on good faith that as long as I am obeying my father and the laws of my King, that I am right with the world.”

“I am not sure I have thought it through even so much as that.” Darrius considered it for a moment. “No, I am sure I have not. One must obey the laws of the land, of course. My father expected obedience while he was alive, but now that he is not, how could I obey his wishes?”

“Our marriage, for one,” Blanche replied. “He must have wished it, else why arrange it? Are we defying our fathers if we do not wed?”

“Mine is out of reach, but we could certainly ask your father. Perhaps he would have some insight into their reasoning. He might even be relieved to learn of not having to hold onto the dowry for you.”

Blanche shook her head. “No, that was set up by my maternal grandfather. None of us can touch it unless I am married. At that time, it will pay me an allowance for the length of my life, and then go to my daughter should I have any.”

“What a very odd arrangement,” Darrius commented. Meanwhile, his thoughts were racing. Even if they were wed, he would not have access to Blanche’s dowry. Oh, his creditors would just love that development!

Still, as long as the wedding was in the planning, he could hold out the hope that his wife’s fortune might be substantial.

Hope was what had allowed him to send two cooks for his mother’s household, while making do with a single additional cook at the Main House. He hoped that he would be able to persuade her to pay them out of her allowance at the end of the quarter. Otherwise, he would scarcely clear the housekeeping budget, let alone be able to consider repairs or a new carriage. He mentally said goodbye to thoughts of a new, super-fine dinner jacket or even so much as a new set of shirts.

He realized that Blanche was still talking.

“ —I will never be as robust as I might have been. Do we not live in a strange world, where to make ourselves beautiful, we also make ourselves ill?”

Darrius suddenly had a vision of himself setting up something similar for a little girl who looked a lot like Blanche. “It is a strange world,” he said, trying to shake the vision. “But men are expected to make provision for their families. A gentleman does not work, but from him, jobs are created, money flows, and the society as a whole is rewarded, which then flows back to him for his keeping.”

“Is it so, Darrius?” Blanche stared at him. For a moment, it was as if he had never seen her before. There was an odd expression upon her face, as if she could not quite believe what she was hearing. She shook herself, and then said, “Never mind. I am sure that you are right, that it does work that way. To be certain, a manor house provides work for

many hands.”

“For which they are paid,” Darrius point out, “thus spreading wealth far and wide.”

My wealth, he thought. The wealth I do not have. Whatever shall I do? Well, I will do what I can, for a gentleman must pay his debts and appearances must be kept up.

“Of course,” Blanche smiled at him. “So what are your thoughts, Your Grace? Shall I announce that I have grown tired of waiting for you? Or that my health has put me more in mind of a nunnery than a wedding?”

“Are you tired of me?” Darrius asked. “Would you prefer a nunnery to a wedding?”

“In truth, I am not overly fond of the idea of either,” Blanche replied. “But we have waited this long to set a date, I do not think a day or two more will matter. My greatest desire is to regain my health.”

“A worthy goal,” Darrius conceded. “What does your father say to that?”

“He says that he is highly in favor of it, even if it means selling off the heirlooms. He incurred a great many debts taking me from one physician to another.”

“And now you discover that by leaving off the face paint, ceasing the medicinal draughts, and simply eating ordinary food will make you well?”

“Dr. Alton says that remains to be seen. He is certain that such a course will, at the very least, not make me any worse. Since each day I felt more disconnected from the real world, more light-headed and yet heavy of heart, I will certainly accept the thought of not feeling worse.”

Darrius nodded. He knew the feeling of spiraling down into despair all too well.

“If it is any comfort to you,” he said. “I rather like this new aspect of

yours. If it is not too great an imposition, I think I would like to stay the course for a bit. Let us get to know one another, as we are now. Not as we remember each other as children.”

“The thought has merit,” Blanche replied. “I think I should like that. But Darrius, there is a possibility that I might not be able to give you an heir. Dr. Alton is not certain that I shall be sufficiently robust.”

“Let us become better acquainted before we think of such things.”

“Thank you for your forbearance.”

“Think nothing of it. We are agreed, then, to wait a while.” Darrius said.

They sat in silence for a time. Then Blanch drew a shaky little breath. “Well, this is certainly a difficult way to get to know one another. Perhaps we should find something pleasant to talk about. Have you read any good books lately?”

“Only Waverly, which my mother summarily dismissed as rubbish. Did you read it?”

“I could only get through the first chapter,” Blanche confessed. “I am not a great reader like Mrs. Swinton and the Duchess.”

Darrius laughed. “In truth, I do not think they read it, either. I gave it to my mother some weeks ago, but when I visited a day or two later, she and Mrs. Swinton were reading my father’s old journals.”

“That actually sounds rather interesting,” Blanche remarked.

“Do you think so?” Darrius stared at her in surprise.

“I do. I’ve kept a journal for ever so long, but I fear it is only interesting to me.”

“What kinds of things do you have in it?” Darrius enquired.

“Oh, what we had for tea, who we visited during a week, that sort of thing. My thoughts. Nothing of great interest, I fear.”

"I see. Perhaps you might read a passage or two for me at some time."

"I will look through them and see if I can find something that might interest you," Blanche said calmly. "What kinds of things do you enjoy, Darrius?"

"Riding to the hounds. It is not so much whether we catch the fox or not, it is more about the horses, the dogs, and the companionship of the other riders."

"That makes sense. Do you enjoy shooting?" Blanche asked.

"I like shooting clay pigeons, but not the real thing," Darrius replied. "I am not fond of all the blood and feathers that comes from bringing down a real bird."

Blanche considered that for a few minutes. "Clay pigeons would be a great deal less messy, and no live thing is being killed. Yet you practice your skill."

"Yes. One never knows when it might be needed."

"When do you think you might need it?" Blanche asked coyly.

"Oh, I don't know. To bring down a real pheasant for dinner, or to defend your wife from a marauding highwayman."

Blanche laughed. "But you just said you hate the blood and feathers. Do you think a highwayman would be less full of the fluid of life?"

"I think he would be likely to fight back, which is more than any pheasant could do. Although, I will own up to liking a bit of pheasant for my dinner."

Blanche shook her head at him. "Oh, Darrius. How fortunate it is that you are unlikely to need to defend me from highwaymen."

"It is, isn't it?" Darrius gave her a boyish grin.

It is more likely your imaginary fortune will protect me from my creditors. And now I learn that you are unlikely to provide me with an heir. Who knows what exigencies I shall have to resort to in order to have one. How

did I ever come to such a pass? Why could you not have been as robust as Mrs. Swinton? Well, time to pull the belt in another notch and put the best face on it that I can.

Chapter 39

The following day brought several changes to the Dower House. When Evelyn entered the Duchess' sitting room, she found that Betty had assisted Her Grace, and had her settled in her comfortable wingback chair before the fireplace.

"I made porridge for Her Grace," Betty explained to Evelyn when she entered the room. "I'm not much of a cook, but makin' porridge was my morning chore when I lived at home. I hope that was all right."

"Oat porridge?" Evelyn asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Swinton. Mum used to make Scottish broth, too, but I wasn't allowed to help with that."

"Why not?" the Duchess enquired querulously. It was clear that she was not in a good mood.

"Because meat was ever so dear, so Mum would not let any of us help with the supper. She said it cost too much to let us go messing about."

"I see," the Duchess commented. "Do you think that you could remember enough of your Mum's recipe to make some for my dinner? Or, better yet, do you think your mother could be persuaded to come work for me for a few days?"

"Why, I'm pretty sure she could, Your Grace. My youngest brother just signed on with a Navy ship, so she don't have no one at home to care for."

"What about your father?"

"Me what? Oh, him. He spends his days at the tavern, drinkin' up

Mum's sewin' money. I'm pretty sure Mum could be talked into cookin' for you for a few days. I don't know about cookin' for the whole house, though."

"Mrs. Swinton, quickly write a letter to this woman who taught her daughter how to make porridge fit to eat. Then you shall have a bowl of it, for Betty seems to have made enough for a threshing crew."

"All here on the hearth, Betty?" Evelyn asked, glancing at the large pot that seemed to take up most of the hearth space.

"Yes, Mrs. Swinton. I hope that was all right. I brung up the smallest pot I could find in the kitchen, an' made it the way Mum taught me. I had eight brothers, and there was only three o' us girls, so's it always tuck a big potful to feed us."

"Share it out with the staff, if you would, please Mrs. Swinton," the Duchess directed. "It will only get cold sitting there, once you have had your fill."

"I will do that gladly," Evelyn said, dishing up a small bowl of the oatmeal porridge. "Oh, my! This is delicious! Your mother let you use cinnamon?"

"Well, only on special occasions, like. Because at home cinnamon was ever so dear an' we din' have it often. But I thought it would be something that you would have often, Your Grace."

"Not too often," the Duchess declared. "But I must say it is all the difference between a bland, gummy mess, and a delicious, creamy concoction."

"Thank you, Your Grace!" Betty curtsied, and gave a beaming smile in response to the praise.

Evelyn could see the sense in getting someone who had a deft touch with food preparation to take over the kitchen. She quickly penned a letter for Betty to take to her mother.

"How long to go and come back?" Evelyn asked.

"Oh, not long at all, Mrs. Swinton. But there's just one thing. Me mum

can't read."

"Can she not?" the Duchess asked in surprise. "I took great care some years back to make sure there was a good school and a teacher in the village. "

"Well, you see, she doesn't come from around here. Me Da does. An' he can read—I think. I can read."

"Very well, then you must read it to her. But hurry back, and bring her with you if you can. Take one of the footmen so he can carry her things. Make haste, Betty, for I think another day of these abysmal meals, broken only with the foods you and Mrs. Swinton can make for me, and my palette will die of ennui. And me along with it."

"Oh, surely you would not!" Betty exclaimed. "But I shall hurry, all the same."

Evelyn made arrangements with Mr. Wilson to share out the porridge, including sending two bowls to Mayson's room where Mr. McElroy was keeping him company for the day.

"This is delicious," Evelyn said to the Duchess. "I'm glad Betty was able to do for you this morning. I am sorry to be late."

"Don't be sorry, my dear," the Duchess replied. "You look worn to death. Did you get any sleep at all last night?"

"A little. Mr. Bruce came in after his shift and sat with Mr. Rudge until it was time for Mr. McElroy to arise. I looked in on them just before I came up. They were waiting for their breakfast, since neither of them are in a condition to use the hearth for cooking."

"How is Mr. Rudge?" the Duchess asked.

Evelyn searched for the right words. "Not doing as well as could be desired, Your Grace. I fear it will be some time before he can return to his duties."

"Do not fret on that account. We shall not turn him out of doors for being ill, Mrs. Swinton. But a cook who can prepare a decent meal, even if it is plain, country cooking, we must have. I cannot think what

Darrius was thinking to send these two.”

“Perhaps he was unaware of their lack of skill,” Evelyn commented. “If they had been working as undercooks at the estate manor house, perhaps they have never had full charge of a kitchen.”

“That could be, but Mrs. Swinton, how many cooks does my son need? he is a bachelor, and rarely entertains.”

“Perhaps that is also an answer, Your Grace. In all events, Betty will be back soon with news for us. While I do not mind cooking for the two of us, I believe the whole house would be happier with better food.”

“Truer words were never said, Mrs. Swinton.”

“Would you like for me to read to you, Your Grace?”

“My correspondence, yes, if you would please. I tried to make sense of it, but my eyes are not what they once were, and the letters all seem to turn into blobs no matter how I turn them about. “

Evelyn obligingly settled down with the stack of correspondence, handbills, and papers that threatened to tumble over and inundate the tea table.

She and the Duchess were thus pleasantly engaged when Dr. Alton came bustling in. “What news?” the Duchess asked.

“I will tell you as soon as I have any to impart,” Dr. Alton said. “I have not yet been in to see Mr. Rudge. The carpenter is here, and is doing the fine measurements for Mr. McElroy’s leg. I will go down directly and help with the final padding and fitting.”

“He will be glad of that,” the Duchess commented. “I’m sure it has been difficult for him, not being able to get about as he is used to do.”

“Very true, Your Grace. And having his recently injured arm bruised and over-stressed has not improved the situation. It is my hope to have everyone feeling better by the end of the day. Now, how are you doing?”

With utmost respect, the physician turned up the hem of the Duchess' gown to have a better look at her ankles. Her feet had swollen until they were almost chubby clubs. Evelyn had elected to not try to slip them into shoes, but had protected them from drafts with a pair of over-sized stockings.

"Tsk, tsk," Dr. Alton clicked his tongue at the sight. "This is not at all good. Are you sticking to you diet?"

"It has been difficult," Evelyn quickly put in. "The new cooks are not at all up to Mr. Rudge's standards. Will we soon be able to have Jemmy back, at least?"

"I'll look in on him before I go back to the village. But unless something untoward has happened between now and yesterday, he should be able to take up his duties tomorrow."

"It is good to know that he is getting on so well," Evelyn said. "I fear those two cooks are going to prove a severe trial to him, however."

"Betty Bates and her mother came up the hill with me. It is my understanding that you are engaging Mrs. Bates to at least cook for the Duchess?"

"That is my plan," the Duchess said. "Betty made the morning porridge. She has no idea how to cook for one, but the porridge was delicious. There was such a copious amount, there is probably a bowl or two left if you wish to try it."

"I had a country breakfast at the inn before coming up the hill, but I'll taste it before I leave. Mrs. Bates will be a good choice as cook for you. Her dishes are by no means the gourmet offerings prepared by Mr. Rudge, but she has good comprehension of taste and substance. She also knows how to cook according to directions."

"That is good to know," Evelyn said, with some relief.

"Now, we need to get the swelling down in these feet. Alternate cold cloths with hot. That will stimulate the flow of blood to her feet, and hopefully carry off some of the swelling. At the very least, it should make the Duchess more comfortable."

"I am right here," the Duchess said crossly. "Do not speak over my

head to my companion, as if I were a child.”

“We all know that you are a lady of great wit and wisdom,” Dr. Alton said soothingly. “But Mrs. Swinton will need to carry out my directions.”

“Very well, but mind that you have a care about these things,” the Duchess sniped at him. “I am in no mood for nonsense.”

“I can certainly see why. Now, I will go down the hall and see Mr. Rudge and Mr. McElroy, and see if we can allow Jemmy back to his duties. Would you like for me to send anyone to you as I go about my business?”

“Indeed I would! Send up those two cooks. I’ve a good mind to dismiss them out of hand, but I will see them and discover if it is possible to talk sense to either of them.”

“I will be glad to do that,” Dr. Alton said, a twinkle in his eye. “I wish I had time to stay and see the show, but I must get back to the village as quickly as I may. The vicar’s wife is expecting her first, and she is in a great taking, even though the midwife is with her.”

The Duchess sighed. “One does miss the old vicar. But everyone ages, and it is not surprising that he would want to spend the rest of his days in quiet comfort. The youngster does give a rousing sermon.”

“That he does. We shall have you up and going to listen to him in no time at all. You might need a chair to get down the hill to the chapel, but we shall get you in shape to walk to the pew on your own.”

“Is that a promise?”

“God willing. A physician can only do so much, Your Grace, but I shall do my best for you.”

“That’s right. Weasel your way out of your promise by blaming God. Go along with you, and send those rascally cooks up to see me.”

“I certainly will, Your Grace. And we shall hope for better days.”

So do we all, Evelyn thought. If Mayson gets well, I will ask for nothing

else in this world.

Chapter 40

Mayson woke feeling as if he had been sealed in a barrel and tossed into a mill stream. His head ached, his skin felt hot, but his bones felt cold. Breathing was a chore.

Mayson tried to heave himself up out of the nest of pillows, for it seemed to him that they were smothering him.

“Easy now, Mr. Rudge.” Mr. McElroy, who was seated beside his bed, reached out an arm to help him up. They were making poor headway with this effort when there came a tap at the door.

“Come in,” called Mr. McElroy.

Mr. Wilson and the carpenter, Mr. Whitley, entered one after the other.

Mr. Wilson hurried to catch Mr. McElroy before he could tumble off the stool chair, while Mr. Whitley hastened to the other side of the bed and helped Mayson sit up. “Heavy weather and knotty wood with you there, Mr. Rudge,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Whitley,” Mayson said. “You have the right of it, I fear.” Then he began to cough violently.

Mr. Wilson handed him a handkerchief, and said to the carpenter, “Let us help Mr. McElroy to the wingback chair. Will you have room enough to take measurements and do fittings?”

“If Mr. McElroy will not be embarrassed to have Mr. Rudge in the same room,” Mr. Whitley replied.

“Not at all,” Mr. McElroy said. “We have been taking care of each

other for a day or two. Although that mostly means talking to each other, and staving off boredom. As long as Mr. Rudge does not mind.”

“It’s fine,” Mayson managed to gasp, before he began coughing again.

Mr. Wilson stepped back, looking worried and perplexed. Fortunately, Dr. Alton entered the room just then.

“Here, my boy, drink this,” Dr. Alton said, taking a bottle from his bag and uncorking it.

Mayson obediently drank off a large swallow, then shuddered. “What was that?” he asked.

“A decoction of mullein and chili pepper in Blue Ruin,” Dr. Alton explained cheerfully.

“Dear God,” Mayson swore. “That is vile.”

“It will either cure you or scare you into pretending you are well.” Dr. Alton began listening to Mayson’s chest through a listening trumpet, then took out his big pocket watch, and began counting the ticks. He looked grave when he finished.

“Now, you might consider this an old-fashioned or even an old wives remedy, Mr. Rudge, but we are going to make up a mustard plaster for you. The Duchess has most kindly sent for one of the village women to take over the cooking for her and for all the invalids. If Jemmy is well enough, it is my understanding that he will oversee the household cooking until you are sufficiently well to take up your duties.”

“Now that is welcome news,” called Mr. McElroy from across the room. “I’ve not eaten so poorly since the last ship I sailed on. Even if it is ever-lasting stew, it will be better than that pie.”

“It was pretty bad. Mrs. Swinton made toast and roasted apples for us,” Mayson confessed.

“She is certainly a resourceful lady,” Dr. Alton observed. “Now, you are to remain in bed, Mr. Rudge. It is fortunate that days are still quite warm, but the nights are beginning to grow chilly. You will have a hardwood fire of seasoned wood so as to make as little smoke as

possible. The plaster might be a little uncomfortable, so you shall have it a few minutes at a time.”

“I know about mustard plasters,” Mayson sighed.

“Excellent,” Dr. Alton commented. “Now I have a birth to attend and a few other things to look into. You bide there a while, and do not get yourself into trouble.”

“Yes, Dr. Alton,” Mayson could not keep the sarcastic edge out of his voice.

Mr. Whitley finished fitting the wooden leg, and went away with it to make a last few adjustments.

Dr. Alton left, and Mr. Bruce came in to help with the mustard plaster.

Then, for a time, Mayson drowsed, propped up on the pillows. After a time, Evelyn came in and sat beside him.

“Mayson, can you take a little soup?”

“Evelyn! When did you come in?”

“Just a little while ago. Come now, you would not eat the porridge this morning, and you’ve eaten nothing today except the medicine Dr. Alton left for you. This is a good beef and carrot soup that the new cook made for you.”

Mayson opened his eyes, and blinked at Evelyn, who was sitting beside his bed with a bowl in one hand, and a spoon poised in the other. “We have a new cook? What about Jemmy?”

“Dr. Alton says that Jemmy is not yet well enough to work, so the Duchess sent for Betty’s mother. You remember Betty. She is the newest maid.”

“I remember Betty,” Mayson said. “Nice person, easy to get along with.”

“The very one. She has been helping with the Duchess. As you might imagine, Her Grace is having a difficult time with all the upset in her

household. Were that not so, I would have been here a good while ago. Now then, open up!”

Bemused, Mayson obediently opened his mouth. The soup was flavorful. There were no exotic spices, but there was plenty of beef flavor, along with a garnish of garlic and onions.

“Dr. Alton says you are to have garlic in nearly everything until the congestion in your chest breaks up. He would not have left us on our own, but the vicar’s wife is having her first baby, and apparently is having a difficult time of it.”

Mayson started to say, “Quite all right,” but as soon as his mouth opened, Evelyn popped another spoonful of soup into it. He chewed, tasting carrot. He kept his gaze on Evelyn’s face. She looked worn and tired.

Mayson swallowed, managed to intercept the next spoonful by catching Evelyn’s hand. “How is the Duchess?” he asked.

“Not doing well. She is having a miserable attack of gout, and is quite upset. She is especially wroth with the Duke for sending us two cooks who are not worthy of the name. She sent them packing this morning.”

“Did she? I would have given a great deal to have seen it.”

“It was a treat. The pair of them scarcely stopped to pack their things, they fled in such a hurry. That perked her up for a little while, but it wore her out, too. She is sleeping now, and I left Betty with her.”

“Do you think Betty can act as a companion for her?” Mayson asked.

“Not really. But she does very well as a chamber maid, better than I in some ways. More than that, I can trust her to stay with the Duchess and not wander off on some misguided personal mission.”

“And how is the new cook?”

“Competent. She understands how to make a good broth. Her biscuits are a little heavy, but Jemmy will more than make up for that as soon as he is able.”

“Evelyn,” Mayson said. “This is all happening because of me. I think you are right, we should go to New South Wales as soon as I am able to travel.”

“You said that yesterday. And I will go with you anywhere you wish to go, Mayson. But first, we must get you well enough to travel.”

“I’m working on it,” Mayson said peevishly.

“Then eat up your soup. I will speak privately with Mr. Wilson.”

“Must you? Are you sure that is a good idea?”

“Mayson, if we do not, we shall be leaving without recommendations. For all his stiff front, he is a kindly man. I think he understands a great deal about our situation.”

“I wish I understood it. Is Mr. McElroy listening to us?”

“No. He went to bed as soon as I came in. Poor fellow! He has also had a hard time of it, but he is much heartened by the prospect of getting his new leg tomorrow.”

“Evelyn, I am serious.” Mayson caught at her arm. “As long as my uncle views me as a threat, anyone near me is in danger. Mr. McElroy, that poor man! I only meant to give him a chance, now look what has happened.”

“He says the new leg is even better than the old one,” Evelyn reassured him. “And I believe the Duchess will keep him on. Jemmy knows to watch for him when he tries too hard.”

Mayson sighed. “I have only wanted to do good.”

“I know.” Evelyn reached out and tucked a lock of hair out of his face. “And you have. This other person, your uncle or whoever it is, that is the person who is doing harm.”

“I know. But sometimes I need reminding. I feel like that person in the fairy tale, Iron John, the one who had the iron bands around his chest to keep his heart from breaking.”

“No broken hearts,” Evelyn said. “I am right here, and I have every intention of staying.”

“Thank you,” Mayson said, pulling her down so that her head rested against his pillow. He leaned his head against hers, taking comfort from her nearness.

A little while later, Dr. Alton came in. “Ah, you two shameless young things!” He exclaimed. “Come now, Mrs. Swinton, go on off to bed. I’ll call Mr. Bruce to sit with him tonight.”

“I am fine,” Evelyn said, sitting up.

“You might be now, but you need some proper rest in a bed, young lady. Off you go now, and let us tend your young gentleman. Go now.”

“Do not worry, Mayson,” she said softly. “I will see to all the arrangements. All shall be well for both of us.”

Then she went away, leaving Mayson to be subjected to an onion and goose-grease plaster for his chest, and another mustard plaster to his feet. Although the treatment was less than pleasant, he had to own that it was easier to breathe, and it felt as if the iron bands around his chest had loosened a little.

Dr. Alton gave him a draught to help still the cough, and to allow him to sleep.

His last thoughts before he drifted to sleep were of traveling with Evelyn, viewing strange sights and even stranger creatures together. It was a far more pleasant prospect than the idea of fighting for an inheritance he was not sure he even wanted.

Outside, in the hallway, a shadowy figure slipped away. With a few backward glances, the shadowy person hastened to report, but not without trepidation, for events had not gone as planned.

T rue to her word, Evelyn spoke with Mr. Wilson.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Mr. Wilson asked her. “It is quite a leap of faith to go off with a gentleman whom you have known for only a few months.”

“I am sure,” Evelyn said.

Mr. Wilson studied her for a few moments. “I will have a word with the vicar for you, providing that you will do one thing for me.”

“What is that?” Evelyn asked.

“I would like for the two of you to sit down with the vicar and discuss your future. Since he has been wed scarcely more than a year, I feel sure he will understand your situation. Mr. Rudge is an able cook, and is likely to be able to provide well for you, but you are technically still in mourning. I will not ask what has made this so urgent to you. The last few weeks have been harrowing for all of us. But I will tell you that circumstances can change quickly, and things might not be as they seem.”

“I understand that. I would not object to a quiet discussion with the vicar, Mr. Wilson. Nor do I think that it will be a problem for Mr. Rudge.”

“Very well. As soon as Mr. Rudge is sufficiently back on his feet to make the journey down to the village, I will set it up for you. Or I can have the vicar come here to meet with you.”

“Do you think he would mind coming here? I am worried about Mr. Rudge. If we were married, it would give me certain privileges in

regards to his care.”

Mr. Wilson made his face very still, but a slight crinkling around his eyes gave away his reaction. “Quite so, Mrs. Swinton. It would attend to the proprieties. I will speak with the vicar. I’m sure he will not mind, providing we can tear him away from his new son.”

“Dr. Alton mentioned he was attending a lying in! So the baby was born?”

“Indeed so. Healthy and whole, with a papa fully prepared to declare his pride from the pulpit, in the market, or anywhere else he can get someone to listen.”

“That is wonderful!” Evelyn declared. “It is so nice to have good news.”

With one thing set in motion, Evelyn went about her duties with a lighter heart. The Duchess seemed in better humor, as well. She sent a scathing letter to the Main House, explaining her dismissal of the two cooks.

“Keep them for your own household, or send them packing,” she wrote. “But do not send them back to me!” Then she handed the missive off to Evelyn to get it hand-delivered to her son.

“That will put salt in his tea!” the Duchess declared. “Send me his second-rate castoffs, will he? Ungrateful child!”

“I’m sure he did no such thing,” Evelyn soothed, although she was not at all sure that is was not the case.

Whatever the Duchess’ intent, the note brought the Duke to the Dower House to pay his mother a visit. “Go take care of Mr. Rudge,” the Duchess directed Evelyn when the Duke was admitted. “I will have a word or two with my son. Please close the door behind you.”

Evelyn hoped all would go well, but she feared that the Duke, at least, was in for an unhappy hour with his mother. She put them out of her mind and hurried to the guest chamber that was now Mayson’s room.

She was pleased to discover that he was sitting up and sipping tea

while talking with both Mr. McElroy and Jemmy.

“How are all of you?” she asked brightly as she entered.

“Fine as frog hair, and twice as lively,” Mr. McElroy declared. “The carpenter brought up my new leg this morning, and I’ll be back to work as soon as Dr. Alton says I may.”

“Splendid!” Evelyn said. “And you, Jemmy?”

“I’m already back,” Jemmy said. “I just came up to bring Mr. Rudge his tea, and to talk with him for a minute. Mrs. Bates says that she can make chicken and sage dumplings, so I was askin’ Mr. Rudge about what would go with them.”

“What did you decide?” Evelyn asked.

“Creamed peas, and glazed carrots,” Mayson replied. “Jemmy knows how to make the carrots, and most country women know how to cook creamed peas. It will be a simple meal, but one well suited to the household.”

“That’s a relief,” Evelyn said. “The stew is excellent, but I was hoping we would not need to subsist on it forever.”

“I should be heading on back,” Jemmy put in. “Mrs. Bates is a good cook, and a dab hand at orderin’ folks around, but she doesn’t know where everything is. Between us, though, we’ll do all right.”

When he had departed, Mr. McElroy said, “Believe I’ll take a turn up and down the hall a few times to get the padding on my new leg settled in. That Mr. Whitley is a real artist. If my new leg wasn’t the color of a pine branch, you could almost swear it was real. He’s got it set up so’s I can even put a shoe on it if I wish.”

Evelyn smiled at him. “That is wonderful. I hope it is easy to walk on.”

“That’s what I’m about to go find out,” Mr. McElroy replied. Then he stumped out, swinging the prosthetic a little awkwardly, but clearly well pleased with his new limb.

When the door closed behind him, Evelyn turned back to Mayson. "How are you, Mayson?"

"Truly better, I think. My chest does not feel so tight, and I am growing heartily tired of garlic. If I never see another mustard plaster in my life, I think it will be too soon. But better."

"You sound better." Evelyn sat down beside the bed, and took one of his hands in both of hers. "I spoke with Mr. Wilson. He will ask the vicar to visit in the morning and to speak with both of us. It seems that Mr. Wilson has some reservations about the haste with which we are making arrangements."

"I will own I have a few reservations myself," Mayson replied. "I worry that this might be something that you will regret."

"Are you thinking of jilting me, Mayson?"

"Jilting? Oh, no! Not at all. I consider myself the luckiest fellow alive that you would even consider me. But I would be remiss if I did not point out to you that a man who is flat of his back, with what feels like an ocean of liquid sloshing around in his chest, is scarcely a prize."

"We are going to get rid of that ocean, and everything will then be wonderful," Evelyn declared.

Mayson ran a finger along the veins on the back of her hand. "Such a tiny hand, to hold my fate. But, Evelyn, try as I may, I am not perfect."

"I know that. Neither am I. But Mayson, I feel alive when I am with you. It is even better than reading books and chatting about current events with the Duchess, who is one of the most stimulating conversationalists I have ever met."

"But what if I become old and stodgy?"

"What if I become haggard and shrewish?" Evelyn countered.

"Not possible," Mayson returned. "You will always be beautiful. You will be one of those grandmothers everyone talks about who only get

better with age.”

“Grandmother.” Evelyn looked off into the distance. “Mayson, John and I did not have any children, and it was not for lack of trying. What if we have none?”

“Then we will take in orphans,” he returned promptly. “Goodness knows, London is teaming with them, poor little mites. How many do you think we could foster?”

“Oh, at least twelve times twelve,” Evelyn said lightly.

“A gross of orphans?” Mayson burst out laughing, then started to cough. He reached for a clay bowl and spat into it. “Dr. Alton says he wants to see what comes up,” he commented. “I cannot think why.”

“I can,” Evelyn said, helping him set the bowl back out of the way. His sputum was still thick but not as green, she noticed, and there were no flecks of blood in it. “By looking at it, he can tell how your lungs are doing. Oh, Mayson, yesterday I feared I would lose you!” She pulled his hand to her, kissing the knuckles.

He turned it over so that he could cradle her cheek in his palm. “No. The only way you will lose me is if you want to be rid of me. “

“Oh, Mayson...” Evelyn started to say.

But her reply was lost as the Duke opened the door and glared at them. “Is this what you do when you are being paid to take care of my mother? The Duchess is ready for you now, Mrs. Swinton. Come along, now!”

Out in the hall, the Duke glared at her. “Quite a common little thing, are you not? You’ll not be a Duke’s mistress, but you will take up with a cook.”

“Mr. Rudge has offered me marriage, Your Grace.”

“Well! You could hardly expect me to do that. I promise my arrangements for you would be quite comfortable. You would never want.”

"I do not expect you to do anything at all, Your Grace. I am sure your arrangements would be generous. But I love Mr. Rudge, and he loves me."

"While I go to a loveless marriage for duty's sake. Have you no pity for me at all, Mrs. Swinton?"

"A great deal, Your Grace. I hold you in respect for your care of your mother, and it is plain that you do not hold Miss Notley in contempt. A lesser man might have cast her off in her illness."

The Duke's face softened, the thunderclouds of anger that Evelyn could visualize as swarming around his head perhaps thinning a little. "I will always hold Blanche in some degree of affection. We grew up together, almost like brother and sister. Shall I be like the Egyptians of old who were said to marry their own siblings?"

"There is no consanguinity between you. Should not those married to each other feel as close as brother and sister?"

The Duke slumped back against the wall. "I do not know. I feel so confused. You are confident, self-possessed, vibrant. Even with the changes in her dress and diet, Blanche is wan, listless. I am a man, Mrs. Swinton, with a man's needs. Can you not take pity on me?"

Evelyn slipped past him, moving on toward the Duchess' chambers. "I feel pity for you, Your Grace. But my duty is to the Duchess. Since you are in quite a mood now, I feel I should go to her. You quarreled?"

The Duke nodded. "We did. Over those two cooks, of all the foolish starts. Those were not under cooks. They were the primary cooks for my household. They can cook roasts of magnificence, and I love their steak and kidney pie."

Evelyn clapped on hand over her mouth, to stifle a laugh.

"Did I say something funny, Mrs. Swinton?" The Duke put a little menace in his voice.

"Oh, dear. I am not laughing at your upset, Your Grace. But the Duchess detests steak and kidney pie. She and I had toasted bread, cheese, and apples roasted on her hearth that night."

“Really?”

“Really, Your Grace. I think it would go a long way toward soothing your cooks if you went home and requested your favorite dish. There is no doubt that they are feeling slighted. But I should go to your mother, for if you are any barometer to go by, she is in a great taking.”

The Duke wilted further. “I suppose she is. Go to her, Mrs. Swinton. Make apologies for me if you will. However angry she makes me, I do love my mother.”

“That, Your Grace, I will gladly do,” Evelyn said, and quickly escaped into the Duchess’ chambers.

Chapter 42

The following morning, the Duchess was still fuming. “His best cooks. His best cooks! Mrs. Swinton, it is a wonder he has not turned into a wraith, floating on the wind.”

“It is a miracle, Your Grace. But when he spoke to me in the hall, he did tender his apologies.”

“Be as that may, Mrs. Swinton, he should have had better sense. All those heavy foods, and the complaints about their behavior with the rest of the staff. It is beyond bearing.”

“Perhaps gentlemen prefer different foods. Did you not say that your dear departed enjoyed a kidney pie now and then?”

“I suppose I did say that, and it is true. But, oh, Mrs. Swinton, I could scarcely bear the scent of it! The cook we had then always made a fish pie for me on those days. He never expected me to eat the nasty organ meats.”

“What a blessing that you do not like them, since Dr. Alton has said that they will aggravate your gout should you eat them. Apparently they do something to the humours of the blood, a sort of thickening that is harmful.”

“I will own that the baked apple you prepared was much more appealing,” the Duchess averred. “So, what shall you do today?”

Evelyn felt her face heat up.

“Aha! Something to do with Mr. Rudge, is it not so?”

“Yes, Your Grace. The vicar is coming up from the village to discuss

the possibility that we might wed.”

“Oh, you sly boots! Well, I cannot think of a finer man or finer cook. Will you continue on here at the Dower House?”

“First, we will get Mayson well,” Evelyn said. “Then we shall see. If you have no objection to our marriage, I cannot think why we might not continue on for a time. But we have discussed going abroad to start a new life.”

“I can see the appeal of that. Forging a different world, wresting your living from the wilderness. But Mrs. Swinton, what will I do without you?”

“That is the one reason we might continue on, Your Grace. Both of us have grown fond of you. But Mr. Rudge has been training Jemmy. How did you find your breakfast?”

“Excellent! The scones were perfection, the tea brewed just as I like. Betty did a good job serving it. But, my dear child, she is not you.”

“I don’t know what to say, Your Grace. Perhaps we could send to the agency and start training another companion.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” the Duchess said sadly. “But no matter how competent she might be, a new companion will not be you.”

“I know,” Evelyn said, sitting down on the ottoman so she could face the Duchess. “But if I have the training of her, at least I will know that I am leaving you in good hands. I would not have you worried by another companion who is more concerned with setting her cap for the Duke than with your care.”

“Well, well.” The Duchess pulled a long face. “Young people all eventually go off on their own, it is the way of things. Will you at least write to me?”

“Oh, most assuredly, Your Grace! I would be honored to correspond with you. I do hope you will write back.”

“Of that you may be certain, Mrs. Swinton. Although, I suppose you will be Mrs. Rudge by then.”

Evelyn gave a little laugh. "I certainly hope to be. But we are not yet wed, Your Grace. Today's visit from the vicar will only be a discussion of when and where. Mr. Rudge and I are in agreement as to joining our fates, but we have not yet determined when."

"Do let me know your plans, as soon as you have them firmly in mind, Mrs. Swinton. There is nothing more delightful than planning a wedding. I do hope you will let me help?"

"To be sure, Your Grace. I can think of nothing I would like better."

"Then do go directly, and bring in those books of wedding gown pictures. Oh, and all the broadside sheets, as well. We cannot have you poorly turned out."

"Keep in mind, Your Grace, that I am not a lady, with limitless funds."

"To be sure you are not, my dear. But with my help, we can put together an attractive and practical trousseau, as well as a gown suitable for a widow embarking upon her second marriage. I am not so lost to practicality as to not recognize that a gown suitable for, oh, say Blanche, would not be a good choice for you at all. But there is no reason why we cannot have an enjoyable time looking over the patterns."

"Indeed, it would be a pleasant way to pass the time, Your Grace."

"And a practical one, Mrs. Swinton. If you are to head out into the wilderness, I think you shall need some gear other than that suitable to be worn about this modest establishment."

Evelyn laughed. "Oh, Your Grace! You are the most complete hand! I can promise you that I have clothing that could be worn as a frontier wife."

"That is good to know. But I shall see to it that you start your new life well provided with a modest trousseau, and perhaps some household goods besides."

Seeing that there was no dissuading the Duchess, Evelyn cheerfully went to the library and brought back a stack of pattern books, as well as two or three travelogues recounting travels in the wilderness.

They were cheerfully engaged in reading one of the travelogues, when Mr. Wilson politely tapped at the door. "There are several gentlemen here to see Mrs. Swinton," he said. "They include Dr. Alton, Constable Morris, the vicar, and two gentlemen who came with the constable."

"Goodness! You certainly should go see them, Mrs. Swinton!" the Duchess exclaimed. "I shall look over these woodcuts, and I will be here when you return."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Evelyn said. "I will try to be as quick as I may."

Evelyn hurried downstairs in the butler's wake, and was astonished to see that the small drawing room located just off the dining room was quite full of masculine persons.

"Mrs. Evelyn Swinton," Mr. Wilson announced her. Then added formally, "Mrs. Swinton, I believe you already know Dr. Alton and Constable Morris. This is Vicar Talverton. But I am not acquainted with the other two gentlemen."

"This is Mr. Smith, and that is Mr. Martin," Constable Morris explained. They have been sent down from London by the magistrate Mr. Rudge wrote to about a certain confidential matter. Their faces are known to me, so I am able to vouch for them, but they also carry letters of introduction for Mr. Rudge and for the Duchess."

"Thank you, Constable Morris," Mr. Wilson said. "Those letters should go up to the Duchess forthwith. Meanwhile, I will send for tea. Mrs. Swinton, will you take the letters up to the Duchess? If the rest of you would be so good as to wait?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilson," Evelyn replied at once. The gentlemen in the room all nodded, and settled themselves on various chairs and on the sofa. Evelyn could hear the rumble of male voices as she hurried back up the stairs to the Duchess, carrying the letters of introduction that were addressed to her.

"What news, Mrs. Swinton?" the Duchess asked, setting to book of woodcut pictures aside, and looking at Evelyn expectantly.

"I do not think I have ever seen the downstairs drawing room so full!" Evelyn replied. "The vicar, the constable, the physician, and two

gentlemen from London, all packed into one small room like a box of dried herring!"

"That must be quite a sight," the Duchess said, a smile playing around her lips. "So why are you back up here?"

"The gentlemen from London have letters of introduction to you, and I have been sent upstairs to bring the letters to you. Constable Morris says that he knows them by sight, so we can be sure that they are not imposters."

"Was there a question?" the Duchess asked, breaking the seals on the letters. "To Her Grace, blah, blah, blah..." the Duchess made skimming through titles noises, "And now to the meat of the matter: Introducing to you Mr. Reginald Smith and Mr. Thomas Martin, who are being sent to you to act as bodyguards for the gentleman known as Mr. Mayson Rudge." She looked up from the letter. "Known as... is there some question of Mr. Rudge's identity?"

"I'm sure that is just a manner of speaking," Evelyn said hastily. "I believe Constable Morris was concerned for Mr. Rudge's safety, and sent for these gentlemen."

"Is that so?" the Duchess said, a little skeptically. "Well, I shall let it stand for the now. Since their credentials are in order, I scarcely need to see them. Go back, and have Mr. Wilson get them settled in and shown to their duty. I will own, that having someone responsible for Mr. Rudge's safety until he is back on his feet would be a great relief."

"Just so, Your Grace," Evelyn replied, with a deep curtsy. "I will go back and tell him at once."

"Thank you, my dear. Go, take care of our excellent cook. We have had enough of these dreadful doings. Perhaps with their help, the Constable will be able to get to the bottom of all these things."

Evelyn gave another deep curtsy, and hastened out the door and back downstairs. "The Duchess says to go ahead and get them settled at their post," she announced without ceremony.

"Excellent!" Mr. Wilson remarked. "There are too many of us to all fit into Mr. Rudge's small chamber, so I shall take Constable Morris and his two companions up first, if you do not mind, Mrs. Swinton, Dr.

Alton.”

Evelyn was impatient to see Mayson, even though she had looked in on him at breakfast. But she assented to Mr. Wilson's suggestion, and remained in the drawing room with Dr. Alton and Vicar Talverton. She crossed the room, holding her hand out to the vicar. “It is so kind of you to come to us while Mayson is ill.”

“I have seen both of you at a distance,” the vicar replied. “I believe you have been coming to Sunday morning services?”

“Yes, we have,” Evelyn replied. “And I recognize you, although I have not heard your name until today. Everyone just speaks of ‘the young vicar’ when they speak of you.”

Vicar Talverton made a slight face. “I fear I shall be the ‘young vicar’ for at least the next ten years. It takes a good, long while for country folk to let go of a favored personality.”

“Indeed, it does,” Evelyn gave a little laugh. “But being the young vicar is not always a bad thing. I have heard only good reports of you. Now that you are a father, the villagers are more likely to warm to you.”

The vicar fairly beamed, smiling broadly. “You heard?”

“I think everyone has heard,” Evelyn said. “What a happy event. Your son and wife both continue to do well?”

“Bursting with health, both of them. There has never been such a wonder as my Nettie.”

Mr. Wilson came hurrying to the door. “Mrs. Swinton, Dr. Alton come quick. Something dreadful has happened, and Mr. Rudge is nowhere to be found.”

“Where could he be? We shall come at once!” Evelyn exclaimed, hurrying through the door.

Dr. Alton and the vicar hurried along in her wake, neither of them speaking.

What can have happened to him? He was sitting up in bed, but not well enough to get up. Is he better? Did something frighten him?

Evelyn could scarcely breathe, her fear was so great.

Chapter 43

It was a fearful sight that met their eyes as they entered the small guest chamber. The bed covers were in a knot, as if there had been a struggle. The bedside table was overturned, and the clay dish that been sitting on it was shattered on the floor, spilling its grisly contents.

Mr. McElroy was sprawled across the floor, his new leg broken into splinters. There was a large bump on his forehead, and blood was spreading from a wound on his arm. Dr. Alton hurried to him, while Evelyn paused in the door. “What happened?” she exclaimed in bewilderment.

“That,” said Constable Morris, “is the question of the day. I was hoping you might have some answers for us.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I don’t. I saw them at breakfast, then I went down the hall to spend time with the Duchess.”

“You’ve not been back to this room since?” Constable Morris asked.

“Not at all! What about Mayson? What has happened to him?”

“He was not here.” Constable Morris’s mouth was set in a grim line. “We can only hope that he was frightened and ran. The other possibilities are far more grisly.”

“Such as?” Evelyn fixed him with a glare.

“That he might have attacked Mr. McElroy.”

“I hardly think that likely,” she said tartly.

“Or that they were both attacked, which is more likely, and that Mr. Rudge was harmed, and then bodily carried away.”

“You will find him?” Evelyn could hear the distress in her own voice.

“We will do our best,” Constable Morris said. “We will start a search immediately. But Mrs. Swinton, with scarcely any information to go on, we will have a hard time of it.”

Betty appeared at the doorway. “Mrs. Swinton, the Duchess... Oh, dear Lord! What happened here?”

“That is what we are trying to determine,” Constable Morris said. “Mrs. Swinton, go on back to the Duchess. We will come talk with you directly. We need to clear the room so that Dr. Alton can work with Mr. McElroy.”

“Come on, please, Mrs. Swinton,” Betty tugged at her arm. “We’s just in the way here.”

Reluctantly, Evelyn let Betty draw her away, but not without one distressed backward glance.

“I will come to you as soon as I know anything,” Constable Morris said. “We will find him, Mrs. Swinton.”

Evelyn entered the Duchess’ drawing room as if she were a puppet on strings and sat down on the ottoman.

“What is it, Mrs. Swinton?” the Duchess asked in alarm. “What has happened?”

“Mr. Rudge is gone, and Mr. McElroy is dreadfully injured.” Evelyn buried her face in her hands, and tried to pull herself together.

“But how can this be? Did you not just see them both at breakfast?”

“I did, and now... Oh, Your Grace I am so dreadfully frightened for Mayson.”

“Oh, my dear. I am sure you are. But this is all very strange, Mrs. Swinton. Why should a cook, even a cook as excellent as Mr. Rudge,

be a target of so much malice?"

A sob escaped Evelyn. "It is all my fault."

"Your fault, Mrs. Swinton? But that makes no sense either. Come, come my dear. How can it possibly be your fault if you have been here with me all morning?"

"I will be breaking a confidence if I tell you," Evelyn looked up at the Duchess. Her tear-streaked face was so pale it appeared bloodless.

"While I would normally endorse keeping secrets secret, this is hardly the time to keep something to yourself if it can help get to the bottom of this, Mrs. Swinton. Consider me your confessor. I will keep your secrets."

"It is not my secret." Evelyn scrubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands.

"Evelyn, dear child," the Duchess said gently, "If you can shed some light on all these strange happenings, then you should. Tell me, at least, and I will be the judge of whether it needs to be told to others. If it should, I will also sift those who should know from those who should not."

To tell or not to tell? If Mayson has been harmed, if the knowledge could save him, I hardly know what to do.

The war within her must have shown on Evelyn's face for the Duchess said gently, "I would never tell anything that would harm either of you."

Evelyn pulled her handkerchief from her sleeve, wiped her eyes and nose, before folding it and tucking it away again.

"Very well, Your Grace. I must trust someone. Mayson is not quite who he has appeared to be."

"Aha! I knew it! Say on, Mrs. Swinton."

Evelyn tried to think of the best way to say it. "His name, Your Grace, is Mayson Rutley."

“Rutley! He is the lost heir?”

Evelyn nodded. “He feared for his life, so he faked his own death shortly before he was to come into his majority. But now...”

“Now?” the Duchess prompted.

“Now, he has been unhappy about the way the people at Hillsworth have been treated. And about how tumbledown it has become.”

“I see,” said the Duchess. “but how does that become the tale of mayhem and mishap that has developed for the last few weeks? And how can it be your fault?”

“It is my fault because I encouraged him to begin to take steps to claim his inheritance, Your Grace. He has a friend who is a magistrate. After Mayson went to him to begin the process of proving his identity and taking his rightful place, the accidents began to happen.”

“I see.” The Duchess tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. “Was this also about the time that the broadside advertising a reward for locating the heir came out?”

“Why, yes, Your Grace. I believe it was.”

“Now that is very interesting. This curious tale might have more than one branch to it, and perhaps a few red herrings, as well. Send for the constable. He, at least, should hear this.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Evelyn rose and tugged on the bell pull.

Mr. Wilson came to the door. “You rang?” he asked.

“Yes, Mr. Wilson. Please send the constable up to me. There is something he should hear.”

When Mr. Wilson had departed, Evelyn said, “There is something else you should know, Your Grace.”

“What is that, my dear?”

“Yesterday, he decided to give it all up. As soon as he is well enough,

we plan to travel to New South Wales to begin a new life.”

“Good gracious!” the Duchess exclaimed. “I thought you were both happy here.”

“We were. We are, Your Grace. But Mayson felt that his presence is endangering the household. Much as I love working here, I could not let him go alone.”

“Of course you could not,” the Duchess agreed. “I should be loath to lose either of you, but I would not stand in the way of such love as I have seen developing between the two of you. I had hoped that I would have both of you continuing on as part of the household.”

“I know, Your Grace. We might have been glad to do so, had not this unknown person begun creating situations that endanger the everyone.”

“That intolerable situation must stop, of course,” the Duchess said firmly. “That is why we shall speak with the constable.”

There came a tap at the door. “Come in,” the Duchess called.

The constable entered the room.

“Constable Morris, Mrs. Swinton has something she needs to tell you.” The Duchess looked around at the servants and the other gentlemen who had entered the room with Constable Morris. “Clear the room, please.”

When the last extra person had left the room, the Duchess turned to Evelyn. “Tell the Constable what you just told me.”

Evelyn gave one little hiccupping sob, and recounted her story again, this time in more detail.

“So,” the Constable said slowly, “Mr. Rudge proposed to you. Then when you accepted, he revealed that his name is more correctly Mr. Rutley, or Lord Hillsworth. He showed you a crescent moon birthmark which indicates that he is rightfully the Earl of Hillsworth. Is that what I am hearing?”

Evelyn nodded. "Yes, Constable Morris."

The constable stood up, looked as if he would like to pace the floor, but since there was no room, he walked around his chair and sat back down. "Is there anyone besides his uncle who could vouch for his true identity?"

"Why, if he really does have the birthmark, I suppose I could," the Duchess said. "I have not seen him since he was a tiny child. Not knowingly, anyway, and I had no reason to inspect my favorite cook's wrist to look for markings."

"How would you know about it?" Constable Morris asked.

"George and I were visiting—George was the late Duke—when the Rutley baby was about two years of age. He fell down and skinned the palm of his hand. I used my handkerchief to bind up his wound until we could take him inside and deliver him to his nurse. I suspect she would know him, too, if we could find her."

"Was she an older woman?"

"Dear, no. She was a village lass whose babe was stillborn. Lady Hillsworth died in childbed, so while it was tragic for the young mother, it was fortuitous for the baby. I do not think she was a day over eight-and-ten summers when the accident occurred."

Constable Morris made some notes in a leather-bound book that he tucked back into his pocket.

"This certainly explains motive, especially with the handbills that are being circulated offering a reward. But it really gets us no closer to finding him. Is there any place he might have gone to hide? Any favorite place he might run to?"

Evelyn shook her head, indicating that she did not know. Then she added, "We used to picnic on the dock that juts out into the mill stream down by the huge willow. But I do not think that would be a good hiding place."

"That at least gives us another place to look," Constable Morris said.

“Can I help look?” Evelyn asked. “If he is frightened, if I call for him, I think he would come to me.”

The Duchess looked horrified. Constable Morris shook his head.

“It is kindly thought on, Mrs. Swinton. But we could easily lose you as well. No, I will have one of the footmen take Mr. Smith or Mr. Martin to check around the willow. Meanwhile, I will call upon the men from the village, and send them out in teams to cover the grounds.”

“But what if the teams are part of the problem? Oh, please, Constable Morris. I cannot just sit here and wait. I think I should go mad.”

Constable Morris’s face softened. “I understand. I will send you out with one of the teams. But you are on no account to go alone.”

“Thank you, Constable Morris. Just let me quickly change into a walking suit. I will not be but a moment.”

As Evelyn hurried to her room, she heard the Duchess ask, “Will she be safe? She has grown dear to me.”

And Constable Morris’s reply, “I will add her to my search team. That way I think she will be safe enough. Meanwhile, I will station one of my men at your door lest you be in danger.”

Evelyn did not hear the Duchess’ reply. She was too busy trying to change into sensible outdoor clothing in great haste.

Chapter 44

While Mr. Wilson and Mrs. Henshaw supervised teams of housemaids and footmen to comb through the manor house from attic to cellar, Constable Morris organized men and dogs to search the gardens, stables, and woods about the manor. In addition, he sent teams of fleet-footed village boys to the outlying farms and hamlets in case Mayson had been taken by wagon or on horseback to some other area.

Evelyn trailed after him, uncertain what role she could play, but determined to be part of the search. The Duke's hound master met them near the picnic area. The day had dawned misty and cold, with a stiff little breeze that made Evelyn shiver.

"We'll get the hounds right on it, Constable Morris," the hound master assured him. "Indeed, we need to hurry, because once the rain sets in the scent will not be good."

"I understand." Constable Morris handed over what looked like a nightshirt. "This is out of his soiled linens."

"That seems right," the hound master said, then showed the shirt to the hounds.

The tan and white beasts sniffed at the shirt, then began sniffing around in ever widening circles. One of them began baying by the kitchen door, then broke off, and began snuffling in circles again a few feet out.

"Reckon he picked up an old scent," the hound master commented. "Mr. Rudge's trace should be strong around where he worked."

"He is unlikely to have walked away," Evelyn burst out. "Would the hounds pick up his scent if he was being carried?"

“Fair point,” the hound master commented. “Where was he when he went missing?”

“In one of the guest chambers,” Evelyn said. “His own quarters are still inhospitable.”

“A fire was it?” the man asked. “Miserable business.”

“Indeed,” Constable Morris agreed. “I’ll ask the butler if we can take one or two of the hounds up to the room. Mrs. Swinton has a point. If his feet did not touch the ground, there might not be a trail to follow.”

“Can the dogs pick up the trace of anyone who should not have been in the room?” Evelyn asked.

“Depends on who it was, Mrs. Swinton. Dogs are smart, but they do not understand much in the way of words, and they for sure do not guess thoughts. Best we take three or four dogs, and let them each track a scent. We’ll just have to see what they come up with.”

They went up to the kitchen door, and happened to meet Mrs. Henshaw coming up from one of the cellars.

“May we have leave to take the dogs up to the chamber where Mr. Rudge was staying?” Constable Morris asked.

“On the carpets and clean floors?” Mrs. Henshaw exclaimed in horror.

“It could be a way to find Mr. Rudge,” Evelyn explained. “May we please?”

“Very well, but if one of those dogs lifts a leg, leaves something behind, or chews on the furniture, I shall make note of every item they touched.”

“The Duke’s dogs are very well trained,” the hound master put in. “I hardly think they will do any of those things. Especially since we should need only a short while indoors.”

“Very well,” the diminutive housekeeper said. “But mind that they do not damage the carpets.”

As a group, they trooped up to the guest bed chamber. At a word from the hound master, they spread out and began sniffing around the room. Almost at once, one of them came over to Evelyn, and let out a short, sharp bark.

Evelyn held down her hand, with the back of it facing the dog. "Yes, I was here," she told her.

The brown and white female gave her hand a brief look, and glanced at her handler as if to say, "What now?"

Meanwhile, two of the dogs picked up Mr. McElroy's scent, and apparently that of the people who had helped him back to his room. One of them began baying, as if on the trail of a fox or a badger, and tugged his handler down the hall on the end of the leash, ending up at the door of the guest chamber where the scullery was staying.

Another of the beasts, a wire-haired little terrier, sprang away from his handler, dashed down the hall, and set up a furious barking at a particular door.

"What is in that room?" Constable Morris asked.

"That is the entrance to the Duke's chambers," Evelyn replied. "I do not believe he is in residence today. We would have to ask Mr. Wilson for the key. Those rooms are kept locked unless the Duke is using them."

"I see," Constable Morris commented, studying the little dog who continued a furious scratching and whining at that door.

The handler reached down and picked the little dog up. "I'm sorry, Constable. Maisie is a favorite of the Duke's. She has caught his scent, and probably is hoping for a treat. He spoils her abominably."

The rag mop of a dog continued to squirm and whine. "I'll take her out," the handler said. "Perhaps she needs to relieve herself."

The hound master nodded absently. "Most peculiar behavior. I have not seen her behave like that before, but we usually are accompanying the Duke when we have them out. She likes to ride on his saddlebow."

They had just started back down the hall, when one of the younger pups, who had been casting about the hallway, let out a yip and nearly dragged his handler down the stairs. Maisie struggled in the arms of her handler, and tried to escape.

“Do you think they found something?” Constable Morris asked.

“More likely picking up our back trail,” the hound master said, keeping a grip on the lead attached to the brown and white matriarch who had sniffed Evelyn’s hand. “Here, now, Majesty,” he addressed the hound. “What is it, girl?”

The bitch snuffled and strained at the lead, heading toward the servants’ stair.

“Perhaps they went out that way,” Constable Morris suggested.

One of the youngest handlers snorted. “More likely sniffing out dinner, Mr. Carter. That is a mighty scrumptious odor coming up those stairs.”

“One of the younger hounds, perhaps,” the hound master replied. “But not Majesty. She’s one of our best trackers. Let us see where she takes us.”

The group that had entered, consisting of Constable Morris, Evelyn, Mr. Carter, and three young handlers, followed Majesty. Their progress was accompanied by Maisie’s whimpers as she continued to struggle to get down.

Mrs. Bates, the cook from the village, met them in the kitchen. “Oh, Lor’,” she exclaimed, “There you are. I just told Mr. Wilson that I saw someone leaving by the kitchen door this morning. Whoever it was carried what looked like a carpet. I did not think anything of it, until I heard about Mr. Rudge going missing. Do you think they carried him out that way?”

Majesty had her nose to the ground, and was casting about the stone floor for the scent she had latched onto. Just as they thought they were making some progress, the Duke came striding down to them from the Main House.

“Making trouble again, Mrs. Swinton?” he jibed humorously, as he

approached the group. He then nodded to the dogs, "How are they doing, Carter?"

"They seem a bit confused, Your Grace. They are having a hard time getting a clear scent."

"I should imagine so," the Duke replied. "This is a busy house, and if the culprits are employed here, their scent might well be all over."

Maisie's handler set her down, and the little rag mop dashed straight for him, then ran around him in circles, barking in a high-pitched yap.

The Duke stooped down, and she jumped into his arms, wriggling, and licking at his face. He laughed and said, "Atrocious little beast! What have you been eating? Your breath smells dreadful."

Maisie apparently took this as high praise, for she settled down in the Duke's arms and closed her eyes contentedly.

"You'll get no more from this one," the Duke said. "I'll just take her with me, and go on down to the leading edge of the searchers. I believe they have reached the forest." With that, the Duke of Tolware strode off down the lawn toward the other searchers.

Meanwhile, Majesty continued to snuffle about the grounds. She sniffed at the Duke's footprints, and stared after him, but did not seem to focus on him. She continued to sniff about. More than once, she sat down, looking baffled. But she was soon up on her feet again, whuffling loudly.

Majesty backtracked several times, zigging and zagging here and there. She went to the stables once. The stable master met them, but denied there being any horses missing. "There is a horse blanket gone, though," he added. "It's the one the late Duke used on his favorite horse. We just put it by, like."

"Let Majesty check the stables, then," Constable Morris said. "Perhaps Mr. Rudge is more mobile than we thought, and finding the day chill, took the blanket."

The constable, stable master, and hound master went into the stables. The rest, in deference to the stable master's worry about upsetting the horses, did not go in.

When they returned to the rest of the group, Evelyn could see frustration on Constable Morris's face. "Nothing," he said, in response to her inquiring look. "Just nothing."

As they walked back toward the Dower House, the wind picked up and the clouds that had been collecting overhead began to crackle with lightning. Across the river, the leading edge of the storm was visible. Rain was falling in a torrent. Fat raindrops began to fall from the sky. The group hastily took refuge on the roofed stoop back of the kitchen just in time to shelter from the downpour.

"Well, that's put an end to using the dogs," Mr. Carter said.

"Will you keep on looking?" Evelyn asked anxiously.

"Yes, we will, Mrs. Swinton," Constable Morris replied. "But we are now reduced to what human eyes can see and human ears can hear. Any scent trails that might have been available have been washed away."

Evelyn clasped her hands so tightly together that her knuckles turned white, and stared down across the expanse of lawn toward the meadow, the river, and the forest. "Perhaps Mr. McElroy is awake and we can learn something from him," she suggested.

"My thoughts exactly, Mrs. Swinton," Constable Morris confirmed. "Why don't you go on up to the Duchess for now. Perhaps the two of you can come up with some good ideas. Meanwhile, I will put on my oilskins and go down to see how the searchers are doing."

Going into the house and climbing the stairs to the Duchess' rooms was the hardest thing Evelyn had ever done.

Oh, God, Evelyn silently prayed. Let him be safe. Just let him be safe, and I'll never ask for anything again.

Chapter 45

When Evelyn entered the Duchess' chambers and took off her hat and pelisse, the Duchess looked at her and said, "Well?"

Evelyn shook her head. "Nothing yet."

"This is dreadful. Simply dreadful. Shall we next all be murdered in our beds?"

"We shall take care of you, Your Grace. If I must leave you, some other trustworthy person will be at your side."

"Thank you, my dear. Mrs. Henshaw and Mr. Wilson will see to me. But your concern is noted. Now, what have they done to find Mr. Rudge?"

"Dogs. But now it is raining. The villagers have made a line and are looking through the wood."

"Has anyone thought to look at the old stable?"

"Stable? What old stable?"

"The one that went with the old gatehouse. It was an inn for a time, but then there was some nonsense about population centers and land rights, and the road was moved about five miles west of its usual position."

"No, I don't think anyone has thought to look there. Constable Morris is new to the area, as am I."

"Do ring for someone," the Duchess directed. "I shall send a note to Constable Morris. No. On second thought, we cannot trust anyone

else. Ring for Mrs. Henshaw to stay with me, and you shall go find Constable Morris. Who would you trust to go with you?"

"Jemmy or Mr. Bruce," Evelyn promptly replied. "I would rather have Jemmy, if he can be spared."

"We shall spare anyone you wish, save Mr. Wilson. Mr. McElroy is in a sad way, for this time in addition to his wooden leg being broken, he was hit on the head with a poker."

"Oh, no!" Evelyn cried out. "How is he?"

"Dr. Alton stopped by to see me, and said that his skull was not cracked. Although I believe he has a large bump on his head, it is thought that he will recover."

"This is simply dreadful," Evelyn said. "I begin to see why Mayson wanted to leave as soon as he might be well enough."

"Do you think he might have stolen away on his own?" the Duchess asked.

Evelyn shook her head. "No, I do not believe so. And, in all events, he was still feverish and more than a little ill. If he had left his bed, he would not have gotten far."

Mrs. Henshaw appeared at the door. She was impeccably turned out, as always, but her mouth was set in a straight line, and there were tired smudges beneath her eyes. "How can I help you, Your Grace?" she asked.

"Mrs. Swinton is to go find Constable Morris. I want Jemmy to go with her, if he is well enough, and I will need you and the two maids, Betty and Molly Sue to run our errands."

"I will do it gladly, Your Grace," Mrs. Henshaw said. "Might I make a suggestion?"

"Indeed, you may, Mrs. Henshaw."

"Bring Mr. McElroy up to sit with us. Constable Morris left Mr. Smith and Mr. Martin, the men from London, to watch over him. I would

feel safer to have them both under my eye, as well as Mr. McElroy. That would free up one of the London men to go with Mrs. Swinton, as well as young Jemmy.”

“An excellent solution,” the Duchess said.

Shortly, Evelyn set out in the company of Mr. Martin and Jemmy. All three were equipped with oilskin coats and hats, as the rain continued at a steady rate. The men wore oiled-leather boots, but the only available pair was so large on Evelyn, that she declared she would be fine with her own carefully polished walking boots.

Jemmy guided them down past the willow, then to the back of a long line of villagers who were walking hand in hand, breaking the chain only to go around a tree or similar obstruction. After a couple of inquiries, they found Constable Morris trying to make notes in his book while using his coat as an inefficient umbrella to protect the paper from the rain.

He knitted his brows as he watched them approach. “What happened?” he asked in alarm.

“Nothing horrible,” Evelyn reassured him. “But her Grace had a suggestion for a place to look. She says there is an old stable beside a burned-out inn building. She says she thinks enough of it should be intact to serve as a shelter.”

“Excellent! I shall commandeer a guide, and go there immediately,” the constable said. “Go back to the house, and tell the Duchess I have received her message.”

“I am going with you,” Evelyn said firmly.

“But...” the constable started to protest.

“I’ll go, too,” Jemmy put in. “I grew up here, and know just exactly where that old stable is located. When I was a boy, it had held together enough that my friends and I made a fort of it on more than one occasion. It has grown more ramshackle with time, but it might be better shelter than none in this weather.”

Constable Morris looked annoyed, but he was not about to let a knowledgeable guide out of his sight. “Very well. Let us be about it.”

“We just need to go down the old lane,” Jemmy said, taking the lead. “It is really not far at all.”

“Not far at all” to a country boy is a good way for city folk not used to walking over rough terrain. Evelyn, Mr. Martin, and Constable Morris were a great deal slower than Jemmy in traversing the high grass and weeds that grew in the lane. This was an area that clearly had not been recently mowed.

Evelyn spotted the first sign that they were on the right track. A man’s plain, white handkerchief was trampled into the ground, made nearly invisible by the muck. A little farther along a twig was broken in three places, yet left dangling on the tree.

Within a few strides, they could see a ramshackle stable building. From within it, came the sound of a harsh, booming cough. Before the gentlemen could stop her, Evelyn broke into a run.

*M*r. McElroy was telling a long tale of one of his adventures in Africa. "...an' then I says, never mind that. You'd best . . ." Mayson was listening drowsily, only half hearing the story.

Mr. Bruce entered, and without a word to either of the occupants of the room, he strode over to the fireplace, picked up the poker, turned, and struck at Mr. McElroy with it.

Mayson staggered up from the bed, intending to go to Mr. McElroy's assistance, but he was grabbed from behind, and a strong arm choked off his wind. He struggled, but barefoot and hampered by his nightshirt and the bedclothes that seemed to wind about him like some strange vine, he could not get free.

The old soldier flung up his arm, deflecting the poker, and threw a strong punch at the footman's gut. The younger man twisted away from it, and punched Mr. McElroy in the temple. The soldier fell like a stone.

"The leg. Destroy that leg so that it is nothing but splinters."

"But..."

"Do as I say," the harsh voice barked. "Before I..."

Then Mayson knew no more.

Mayson came to himself sometime later, shivering with cold. He was lying on a lumpy surface, wearing only his nightshirt. His hands were bound behind him, his legs and feet wrapped up in something that kept him from moving. The only blessing was that the thing wrapped about his lower limbs gave the illusion of a little warmth.

“Where is he?” he heard the Duke of Tolware say. “He said he would be here.”

“He will be here, Your Grace,” Mr. Bruce replied. “He promised. I did just exactly as you said I should. I did not tell him any names, I just said I had found his nephew, and he would be here. I just hope to goodness that I did not kill Mr. McElroy.”

“You’d best hope you did kill McElroy, because he saw our faces. I want to turn Rudge or whoever he really is over to Hillsworth, collect the reward, and go pay off my debtors. But just like every other thing in my life, nothing about this has gone as planned.”

“I’m sorry,” Bruce said. “I did my best . . .”

The dust inside the bag over his head began to tickle at Mayson’s throat. His nose began to run, and he began the deep, involuntary coughing that had plagued him for the last several days.

Quick footsteps came toward him, and someone undid the bag. He drew in a deep lungful of cold air, and continued to cough.

When he caught his breath, he said, “If you keep me here in this weather, I am not likely to survive until morning.”

Quick running footsteps could be heard outside the building. “Kill him, and let us escape!” the Duke of Tolware hissed.

“That... that would not be right. We... we were just to trade him... ” Bruce whispered in protest. “I am so sorry, Mr. Rudge,” he said, starting to wrap the rough blanket more tightly about Mayson. “It was not supposed to go like this.”

The door burst open.

“Darrius! Mr. Bruce!” Evelyn exclaimed.

“Evelyn!” Mayson cried out in alarm. “Get away, get back. They mean to kill me.”

“No one is killing anyone,” Constable Morris said firmly, stepping through the doorway, a brace of pistols in his hands. “Martin, clap

them both in irons.” He then set his teeth on his lower lip, and let out a piercing whistle.

“But that’s the Duke!” Martin protested.

“I know,” Constable Morris said, looking grim. “Do it anyway.”

Chapter 47

The crowd of villagers were brought into the large dining room, making it fuller than it had been since the late Duke's time. The Magistrate had been among the searchers, which relieved anyone of the need to send for him.

Darrius was seated to one side of his usual large chair, making room for the magistrate. His hands were still shackled. Mr. Bruce sat beside him.

The Duchess had tottered down from her room, leaning on Mr. Wilson's arm. Lord and Lady Carletane followed her, having shown up while Evelyn was out. Blanche trailed behind them.

Evelyn had shed her oilskins, but still wore her muddy boots. Self-consciously, she shook her skirts out over them as she sat by the Duchess' side. Mayson was seated on her other side, now clad in a robe and wrapped in a comforter with a hot brick at his feet. Mr. Wilson had brought in a stack of handkerchiefs and a small basket. These things now sat in front of him, along with a pitcher and a glass of water.

The magistrate was also equipped with a pitcher and glass. He was just pouring some, when a loud voice came from the hall, "What is this outrage! I protest. I am a law-abiding citizen."

Mr. Smith appeared, escorting Leroy Rutley into the room. Rutley stopped in the doorway, and his mouth fell open. "You! What are you doing here?" he bellowed. "I thought you took off for the Gold Coast or some other foreign parts. Or that you really were dead."

"Was that what you thought, Uncle?" Mayson said in a hoarse voice. "Certainly, you found enough subtle ways to make my death possible. From the school where you sent me, to the sautéed mushrooms. It was

only my good fortune that I know *Clitocybe rivulosa* from *Marasmius oreades*. Foraging was one of the classes at that accursed school. There, you learned, or died. Did you know that, Uncle?"

"So, what, then? You were supposed to learn from it, toughen up. You made it through the war, came home, and you just took off. Left me with the estate to run, and only a few coppers in the house-keeping chest. I could not draw any money, for I was immediately under suspicion for murder. Do you know what it is like to run an estate largely on credit?"

Mayson jerked as if he had been struck, and his face set in anger. "And the mushrooms?"

"What mushrooms? Served when? We had them regularly, sent up from the gardens." Leroy glowered at Mayson. "Anybody could have slipped a few of the wrong ones in."

"Now, what I want to know," Constable Morris put in, "Is how His Grace fits into all this."

"Deviled if I know," Leroy said belligerently.

"Mind your language," the magistrate said mildly. "Your Grace, would you care to tell us?"

"It was the advertisement in the handbill," Darrius said. "News of Mayson Rutley, dead or alive. Mr. Bruce brought it to me, and he seemed to think that the condition of Mr. Mayson Rutley would be a matter of indifference to the person receiving him. Moreover, I felt that anyone living here under false pretenses must be up to no good."

"What do you have to say about this, Mr. Leroy Rutley?" The magistrate asked.

"I printed up the handbills because I needed some kind of proof Mayson was dead. Or I needed him to come home and get on with the business of running Hillsworth. It certainly would not hurt to be reimbursed for the money I spent out of my personal fortune to keep it going. But I never meant for him to be harmed if he was actually found alive."

"I see," said the magistrate, skepticism coloring his voice. "I will ask a

solicitor to go over your records. I trust you did keep records? We shall reconvene at a later date to consider these particulars. Now, then, Mr. Mayson Rutley, while it would seem that your uncle recognizes you, there is the small matter of proving your identity. Do you, indeed, have the crescent moon birthmark?"

Wordlessly, Mayson peeled off the thin leather gloves he wore at all times, revealing the red birthmark in the shape of a crescent moon.

"Very well," said the magistrate. "A formal investiture will have to take place, but I believe we have established that you are Mayson Rutley, the missing heir. However, we have one small thing to take into account. Your Grace, did you order the series of misadventures that plagued Mr. Mayson Rutley?"

"I... yes, Your Worship. But none of them were intended to cause permanent harm. I meant to simply take him to Lord Hillsworth, that is, Mr. Leroy Rutley. I had no reason to think that he meant him harm."

"Was that your only motivation?"

"I, uh, no, Your Worship. I was attracted to Mrs. Swinton, and had hopes of finding favor with her. The cook was becoming something of a rival."

"It was not your intention, then, to set fire to his bed?"

"No! That could have harmed my mother and all her servants. I requested no such thing."

"That's right," Mr. Bruce spoke out of turn. "Deny it all. Throw the flunky on the mercy of the court."

"Why exactly did you cause injury to Mr. Rutley, Mr. Bruce?"

"The Duke told me to scare him. To make him go away, and most of all to make him stop sniffing around Mrs. Swinton. He said to do it in a way that he could be identified, an' declared dead, or at least run out of the country, so's we could get the reward. When that didn't work, he said we would grab him out of his bedroom, and trade him for the reward."

“Reward?” Mayson started to laugh, then broke into a burst of coughing. “There should have been quite a few coppers in the housekeeping account. I made sure of it by leaving my allowance behind. There would have been a quarterly allowance for running the estate. But clearly it was seriously mismanaged, because Uncle Leroy is so lacking in funds, he has been selling snakes to that naturalist fellow, Mr. Petersen. So it is highly unlikely that there was any money to pay a reward. When I learned how the estate was being mismanaged, I went to the magistrate to begin the process of showing that I am very much alive and reclaiming my inheritance, whatever might be left of it. The accidents began after that.”

“So what happened to turning him over to his uncle? Why did you not just tell Leroy Rutley about his nephew?”

Darrius closed his mouth, and looked sullen.

“It was the Lunnon constables!” Mr. Bruce burst out. “Molly Sue said...”

“Oh, no. No, no, no,” Molly Sue put in. “You are not going to drag me into this. The Duke of Tolware approached me, but when the accidents started, I was done.”

“It is an amazing thing that I am alive at all,” Mayson commented.

“Well!” exclaimed the magistrate, “You are clearly alive. It is your desire to take up your responsibilities?”

“Yes,” Mayson replied.

“So, Mr. Leroy Rutley, we are left with a pretty conundrum. It would be unkind to place the brunt of the blame on Mr. Bruce...”

“No, it would not!” Molly Sue spoke up. “He was tryin’ to toadeat the Duke by taking care of his little problem.” She put a sarcastic twist on the words. “Mr. Bruce is not near so nice when the house folk are not around. He tried to corner Betty twice, an’ her scarcely more’n a child. An’, I might add, the Duke tried his hand at Mrs. Swinton, so he ain’t so pure his own self.”

“Mrs. Swinton, did the Duke approach you with an offer?”

“Yes, Your Worship.”

The Duchess nearly exploded. “Darrius! How could you! You know my feelings on this. You know I turned off the previous companion for flirting with you. And besides, you are promised to Blanche.”

The magistrate glowered at both Mr. Bruce and the Duke. “What is it that I am supposed to do with you?” he growled. “You are not quite murderers, though it would seem not for lack of trying. I cannot let you run around the country to get up to more mischief. Next time you might succeed. Moreover, Duke, it appears that you are but a few short steps from debtor’s prison.”

Blanche stood up. “Give them to me,” she said.

“To you?” the magistrate asked incredulously.

“Darrius is my intended. As the Duchess pointed out, we were handfasted when we were still children. I think it might be time to move on into marriage. As his wife, I believe I might have a positive influence. As for Mr. Bruce, however misguided it might have been, I believe he has shown his loyalty to the Duke. With training and supervision, I think he might make an excellent bodyguard.”

“Very well,” said the magistrate. “What say you, Constable Morris?”

“I say that you are the magistrate, not I,” the constable said. “But I would rather not have such goings on in our area.”

“Then I sentence the Duke of Tolware and Mr. Bruce to make all reparations to injured parties, to pay all outstanding debts, and to be remanded into the loving care of Miss Notley, providing her father will stand surety for their behavior. But if either of you engage in such capers again, I shall see you in Old Bailey, see if I do not!”

The magistrate glowered around the room. “Now, as for you, Mr. Leroy Rutley, I have my doubts that you are as innocent as you would have us believe. Your nephew is known as a fine cook and a gentleman who behaves with honor, even without benefit of title or station. I believe that a few years in New South Wales would do you good, and keep you away from spreading your influence farther.” The magistrate looked as if he wanted a gavel to tap.

Mayson waved his handkerchief at him and tried to rise.

“Yes, Lord Hillsworth. Is there something more?”

“Just one thing, Your Worship, I would like to announce that I have asked Mrs. Swinton to become my wife, and she has agreed.”

The magistrate blinked. “This is most irregular.”

Evelyn tugged at Mayson’s sleeve. “Mayson! You will need to wed someone rich and powerful.”

“Evelyn,” Mayson said, turning to her, “I have worked beside you in health. You stood by me in sickness. When I disappeared, you insisted that I be found, and moved the entire village to do it. You are rich in kindness, noble in spirit, and the only lady I wish to take to wife. Please, dear heart, just say yes.”

“Yes, Mayson. But...”

“As you all have witnessed here, I have asked and she has agreed. Let no man or woman try to put us asunder.”

“Hear, hear!” cried the Duchess, clapping her hands together. “Two weddings to plan.” As the room burst into applause, she leaned across the table and murmured, “Darrius, you and I are going to have a long, long, talk.”

“I would like to join you for that talk,” Blanche murmured equally softly.

Mayson put his arm around Evelyn, and she gently leaned into his warmth. “I told you I would make a lady of you,” he said quietly.

“So you did,” she replied. “And you, Mayson Rutley, are the most amazing gentleman in the world.”

Epilogue

An odd assemblage of people sat on the stone terrace at Hillsworth, watching the mowers at work preparing the bowling green. A dozen youths were wielding scythes, while a gaggle of giggling maidens followed along behind them. The maidens were using wooden rakes to collect up the mown grass, depositing it in tall baskets.

“This does bring back old times,” the Dowager Duchess remarked. “Lord Hillsworth, I am so glad you decided to reinstate the custom of having the village maidens follow after the mowers.”

“I remember being one of the youths wielding a scythe, and how mortally embarrassed I was at all the teasing. As I recall, I was being punished for something,” Mayson commented. “Perhaps my uncle hoped I would be bitten by one of the snakes. That field has always had plenty of them.”

“Goodness, gracious!” the current Duchess of Tolware, formerly Miss Blanche Notley, exclaimed. “Whatever are they doing?”

The young men out on the green were whooping and dancing about, while the maidens were shrieking and backing away. One fleet-footed young lady kilted up her skirts and dashed back toward the house where she was met by the butler. The fellow solemnly handed over a pair of blacksmith tongs and a large canvas sack. The young lady dashed back to the youths, handing over the implements to one who came to meet her. In short order, the tongs were used to pluck a wiry, wriggling body out of the grass.

“Smooth snake,” the youth called out.

“Unusual,” remarked a tall, lanky fellow wearing the most unlikely costume. He was clad in a farmer’s tunic over sporty nankeens, had a straw boater on his head, and wore a pair of spectacles with lenses of

amazing thickness. "Smooth snakes prefer dense heather or old logs."

"Even so, Mr. Petersen," the Duke of Tolware put in, "It is no less marvelous than your handbills requesting snakes should have inspired Mr. Rutley to advertise for his nephew, Mayson Rutley, thus setting in motion quite a chain of events."

"A chain of events," the Duchess put in tartly, "That were injudiciously acted upon, nearly ending Lord Hillsworth's life. I still do not understand what you were thinking, Darrius."

"I wanted a new carriage?" the Duke said in a small voice. "He was offering a generous reward, you know."

"A reward which he had no expectation of being called upon to pay," Mayson commented. "Uncle Leroy was using the reward money from the snakes to purchase his Blue Ruin."

"To have such things going on here," the Duchess sighed. "George and I always thought it to be such a model estate."

"It is fortunate that Father made some excellent investments," Mayson remarked. "Even so, we owe a great deal to Evelyn's business acumen. Her experience as a shopkeeper and her frugal housekeeping has been valuable in getting everything turned around."

"You give yourself too little credit," Evelyn said, leaning awkwardly over her rounding stomach to lay her hand over Mayson's. "You are an excellent manager."

"When is your lying in?" Blanche, who was now Duchess of Tolware, inquired.

"Not for a few more weeks, according to Dr. Alton. But I think this little person is doing its best to kick its way out. Mrs. Henshaw is of the opinion that the next heir of Hillsworth could put in an appearance any day now."

"I should give you some sort of gift for your effort," Mayson said, taking up her left hand in his.

Evelyn treated him to a winsome smile. "You have given me the best

gift possible,” she said, turning the plain gold ring with her thumb. “Not in my wildest dreams did I truly believe that you would marry me until we stood before the vicar, and said our vows.”

“You thought me as poor-spirited as that?” Mayson teased her.

“Not poor spirited, just dedicated to doing the right thing. Which, in the eyes of the world, would have been seeking a lady of power and wealth to become your bride.”

“I have a lady of power and wealth,” Mayson said firmly. “Did I not mention this before? The riches you bring to our marriage are not to be found in the finest drawing rooms of London, or the finest palaces.”

“Love can be found in unlikely places,” Darrius declared, turning a fond glance toward Blanche. “I am a far better person for it.”

“Indeed it can,” his wife replied. “How glad I am that we did not give up on each other.”

Just then a shabby carriage drawn by a pair of dapple-gray horses rumbled up the drive.

“My parents have arrived,” Blanche noted, starting to rise.

“No, no, stay where you are,” Darrius said. “I will go to meet them. You need not stir.” He strode away toward the drive.

“Does this mean...?” Evelyn asked delicately.

“It does!” Blanche replied. “We feared that after my illness, I might not be able... but all is well.”

“That is splendid,” the Dowager Duchess put in. “I shall ask Mrs. Henshaw to ferret out all the baby clothes, especially the christening gown. And we shall bring down the cradle and have it refurbished.”

Evelyn and Mayson exchanged a fond glance, remembering a glorious afternoon and how much they had enjoyed rummaging through Hillsworth’s attics, bringing down the carved wooden cradle previously occupied by many little Rutleys, and rummaging through trunks until they found the store of baby clothes.

Some of them had been in sad shape, fit only to use as patterns. But their baby would not lack for clothing. Evelyn's clever way with a needle had seen to that. She had also spun lamb's wool into the finest yarn, and knitted a tall stack of sweaters, hats, and booties.

"I will be glad to help with that," Evelyn said. "Just let me know when."

"Of course, my dear," the Dowager Duchess said. "It would be like old times, except that I would not ask you to take a letter. Thank you for sending your sister to me. She is not you, but she is still a marvelous companion."

One of the youths came up to Mayson just then. "Bowling green mowed and cleared of snakes, My Lord. Shall I bring out the bowls?"

"Please do," Mayson said. Then he looked around the table at the other people seated there. "Anyone care for a game?"

Blanche, Darrius, Lord and Lady Carletane, and Mr. Petersen all strolled down the newly mown bowling green to enjoy a game or two, leaving Evelyn sitting with the Dowager Duchess.

"Are you happy, my dear?" the Dowager Duchess asked.

"Extremely happy, Your Grace," Evelyn replied. "Mayson is everything I ever dreamed of, and more besides. I will always remember John with love and respect, but what we had is as a candle to the sun. How are things with you? How is Darrius faring?"

The Dowager Duchess sighed. "Things with me are as they have been for a long time. I am too old to seek another husband, but I am glad for you, Evelyn. As for Darrius, Blanche seems to have a firm hand upon him, and he is happier than I believe I have ever seen him. I thought my George had gone completely astray in planning this match, but I believe it will be the making of my son."

"That is good to know, Your Grace."

"Indeed it is, Lady Hillsworth."

Evelyn laughed. "How strange that sounds. I keep looking around for

the grand lady who has such a title.”

“You are every inch a gracious lady,” the Dowager Duchess assured Evelyn, “More so than some who were born to the title. If Mayson had not claimed you, I think you might have captured my son’s heart.”

Evelyn forbore reminding the Duchess of the proposition Darrius had made to her. Best to leave that little contretemps in the past where it belonged. “I think Blanche does a much better job managing him than I ever would have done,” she said instead. “It seems that her judgement was sound, and that they are both well content. More than that, Blanche tells me that with careful management, the estate is pulling out of debt and perhaps will even turn a profit in the coming year.”

“I think you are right,” the Dowager agreed. “They seem well suited. And now that Blanche no longer feels ill, her parents are also feeling much better, and doing better. It was a very strange time, but all’s well that ends well.”

When the sun had coasted down the sky in the west, the party broke up. Darrius and Blanche rode away in the shabby carriage with her parents. Mr. Petersen took his collection of snakes and walked down to the village. Evelyn’s sister, Leah, arrived with the dower house carriage. Mayson and Evelyn walked with the Duchess and helped her up into it.

When all the guests were gone, Mayson gave Evelyn his arm, and they strolled up to the house where the cook had a country dinner waiting for them.

They chose to dine in front of the drawing room fire, since it was just the two of them. Evelyn reclined on a sofa, bolstered up by pillows. Mayson lounged on an ottoman beside her, leaning an elbow on the curved headrest.

A basket of strawberries from the Tolware greenhouse sat between them. Evelyn picked the green stem off one and fed it to Mayson.

“Should I not be feeding you?” he asked. Then he returned the favor.

The strawberry juice stained her lips. He bent his head, and kissed her. Evelyn tasted the warm cleanliness of his mouth, mint overlaid by

strawberries.

“I love you,” she whispered against his lips.

“And I love you,” he replied. He laid his hand upon the rounded mound of her stomach, and they both laughed when a tiny internal thump nearly bounced his hand up from where it lay. “When this little one is born, will you dance with me again? I used to dream of dancing with you. The reality was even better than my dreams.”

“Oh, so gladly, Mayson.” She fed him a strawberry, and they kissed again.

Wordlessly, they cuddled each other, sharing strawberries and the occasional long, slow kiss. When the strawberries were gone, Mayson scooped her up off the couch, staggering only a tiny bit with her weight.

“I can walk,” Evelyn protested.

“I know, but I like carrying you,” Mayson replied. “It makes me feel manly.”

Evelyn giggled. “You are manly. You do not need to prove it.”

A short while later, they were curled together in their large, soft bed, exploring such pleasures as were possible when, as Evelyn put it, one of them felt like a beached whale-fish.

After a time, they lay entwined, with Evelyn on her side, and Mayson curled around her back, her head on his arm. “I could stay like this forever,” he said.

“So could I,” Evelyn replied.

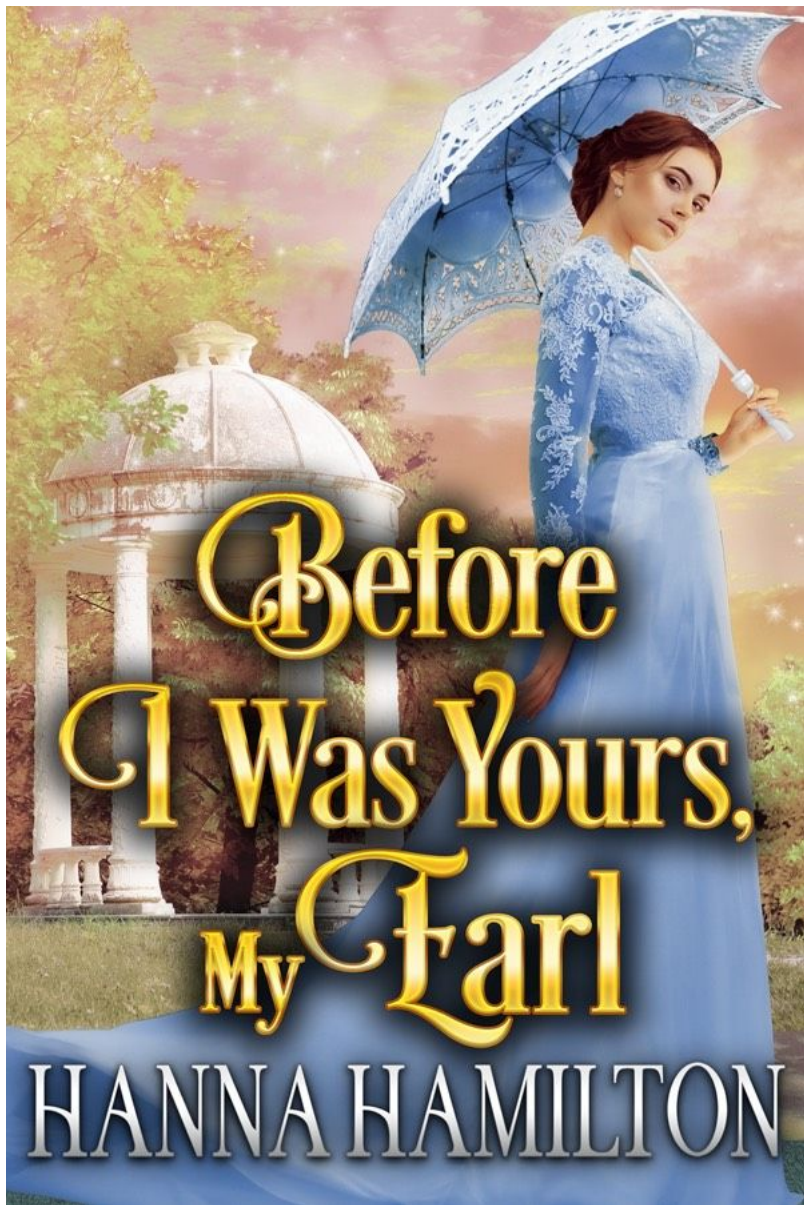
The End?

Extended Epilogue

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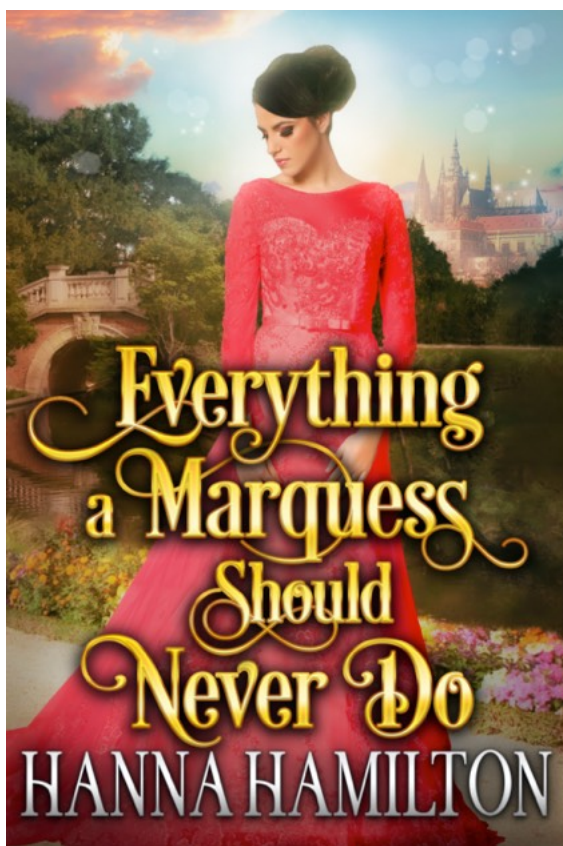
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More sweet historical romance

Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of ***Everything a Marquess Should Never Do***, my best-selling Amazon novel.



Preview: Everything a Marquess Should Never Do

Prologue

At five-and-ten years of age, Blaise Keats could think of a dozen things he would rather be doing than staying at Leosted Manor for the summer.

"There's nothing to do there," he protested as the carriage bore him and his family south. "Why can't the Duke and his family come to *our* estate instead?"

"You know perfectly well why," his mother said. "The Duke and his family spent last summer at our estate, and it's only right that we should take turns. It's our turn to travel to them this summer."

"I don't understand why we have to spend every single summer in their company anyway," he said. "I had hoped to spend time with Percy this summer."

"You see plenty of your friends during the year," his mother said. "You'll survive a couple of months without Percy for company. And to be frank, that's another reason for us to go to Leosted Manor rather than hosting them at our home. You spent far too much time last summer away from the Manor with your friends. Our guests saw too little of you. It was inappropriate."

"They bore me," Blaise said. "The Duke has you and Father for company, and as for his daughter... she's a child."

"She may be a child now," Blaise's mother allowed. "But you know full well that an arrangement has been made between our family and hers. One day, the two of you are to be married."

Blaise couldn't imagine that. His family had been spending summers with the Duke of Leosted and his daughter for the past seven years, ever since Lady Grace's birth. When he thought of her, he imagined the six-year-old child he had known last summer, not a young lady he might one day marry.

Then again, it was difficult to imagine marrying at all. The only thing

Blaise really wanted to do was to spend more time in the company of his friends. He knew that Percy would be spending his summer exploring their local town, riding his horse, and hunting with his father. Blaise would rather have done all of those things than to waste his days in stuffy old Leosted Manor trying to find ways to pass the time.

"I expect you to be friendly to Lady Grace this summer," his mother said. "Do your best to forge a connection of some kind with her."

"That's impossible," Blaise said. "Even if she weren't a child, all she wants to do is read." He remembered well the past summer and the way Lady Grace had spent day after day in the Kirklow Manor library, pulling down one book after another. He had been certain that she wasn't actually reading them—surely a six-year-old child couldn't really read?—but she had sat with them for hours, turning the pages, and she never seemed to grow bored.

"Why couldn't you marry Tom or Reginald to her?" he asked. "They would be a better match."

Tom, Blaise's next eldest brother at age three-and-ten, looked up. "Don't look at me," he said. "This is your burden to bear, brother."

"Stop that talk," their mother scolded. "To wed the daughter of the Duke and unite our families is no burden, Tom. It is an *honor*. Blaise should be proud to be tasked with such an important responsibility."

Blaise shrugged and sat back in his seat, gazing out the carriage window at the passing countryside. It was difficult to imagine taking pride in a situation in which he had no choice. The Duke of Leosted and his own parents had made the arrangement to unite their families years ago, shortly after Lady Grace's birth. Blaise had been only eight years old at the time. He had no clear memory of his life without Lady Grace's presence. She had always been there, a presence waiting for him in his future when the two of them were old enough for one another.

Reginald leaned forward. He was ten years old, and the middle child of the family. "I will marry Lady Grace, Mother," he volunteered. "I think she's pretty."

"I'm afraid not, Reginald," their mother said. "In order to properly unite our families, Lady Grace must marry your father's eldest son and the heir to his lands and title." She shot a glance at Blaise. "As Blaise well knows. This is not a matter that can be negotiated. There is only one viable option."

Blaise sighed. "You and Father should not have made this arrangement without consulting me," he said.

"You were a child, Blaise. Ought I to have asked an eight-year-old boy for his opinion on the matter?"

"This is why arranged marriages are a terrible idea," Blaise said. "Everyone should have some say in who they are to marry."

"Blaise, for God's sake," his mother said. "The way you carry on, one would think you were the first person in the world to ever have an arranged marriage."

"Well, nobody else I know has one," Blaise said.

"I highly doubt that's even true," his mother said.

"Percy doesn't."

"Percy has two older brothers. He is hardly in the same position you are."

"I don't see why I should be punished for being first born," Blaise said. "It's not *my* fault I'm the eldest."

"Blaise," his mother said. "Someday, when you're a bit older, you'll understand that none of this has been done to punish you. Your father and I were trying to help you when we made this arrangement. We want to see you happy and successful. And we want you to prosper from a union with the Duke of Leosted and his family. This is a good thing. It will benefit us all."

"I still say it's unfair," Blaise said.

"Well, say what you like," his mother said. "But I expect you to devote more time to getting to know Lady Grace than you have in years past. She is old enough now for the two of you to become a bit better acquainted. I want to see you spending time in her company."

"She's only *seven*," Blaise protested. "What am I to do with a seven-year-old girl?"

"You manage well enough with your sisters." Blaise's mother indicated Margaret and Cleo, aged seven and five years respectively. Margaret had watched their entire conversation with wide eyes, clearly fascinated by her brother's grown-up concerns. As for Cleo, she had been asleep with her head on Reginald's shoulder for the past hour.

"Margaret and Cleo are different," Blaise said. "At least they like to have fun. I can play hide and seek with them, or we can run around in

the yard and have footraces. Lady Grace doesn't like to do any of those things."

"She's a young lady," his mother said. "She's the daughter of a duke." She turned to her own daughters. "Perhaps the two of you might learn something from Lady Grace's example this summer," she added. "You ought to spend more time with her too, Margaret."

Margaret nodded, her eyes bright. "I want to be friends with Lady Grace," she said. "Is she really my age?"

"You know she's your age," Blaise said, his frustration with his family now extending to his sister. Ordinarily, he got along very well with Margaret, but today it felt like everything was an irritation. "You've spent every summer of your life with her."

"I know that," Margaret said. "But I don't remember how old she was."

"She's the same age as you are," Blaise's mother said. "In fact, the two of you were both born in the month of December."

"Wow," Margaret said.

"And when Lady Grace and Blaise marry, she'll become your sister," their mother went on. "Won't that be lovely?"

"Yes." Margaret looked over at Cleo. "I'd like to have a sister my *own* age."

Thankfully, the carriage pulled to a stop. Though Blaise wasn't excited to be arriving at Leosted Manor, he didn't think he could bear any more talk of his marriage to Lady Grace. At least he would be able to get away from his family for a while.

They all got out of the carriage. The Duke was waiting for them. Standing beside him in a pale blue gown that matched her eyes, her black hair falling in curls about her shoulders, was Lady Grace.

Blaise's father strode over to the Duke and bowed. "Your Grace. Thank you, as always, for your hospitality."

"It's a pleasure to see you and your family again, Lord Kirklow," the Duke said. "We're so pleased you're able to be with us for another summer. I trust your journey was pleasant?"

"Pleasant enough, thank you," Blaise's father said.

"My staff will take your things to your rooms for you," the Duke said.

“Perhaps my daughters and I will retire to freshen up,” Blaise’s mother said. “We’ve had a long journey.”

“Of course,” the Duke said. He beckoned to his butler. “Carlton will show you to your rooms. If you’d like to meet us in the sitting room whenever you’re ready, we’ll have tea.”

“Lovely.” Blaise’s mother started to follow Carlton away, but before she left, she leaned in toward Blaise. “Speak to Lady Grace,” she hissed.

Blaise suppressed a sigh. He had no desire to engage the girl standing before him in conversation. But his mother would be asking his father later if he had complied with her wishes, and he knew it was best to do as she had asked and avoid any later recriminations.

“Good day, Lady Grace,” he said, bowing slightly. “It’s a pleasure to see you once again.” He couldn’t help remembering as he spoke that Margaret had confessed to not remembering Lady Grace’s age. Surely Lady Grace would have no clear memory of him.

She curtsied. “Welcome to Leosted Manor, My Lord,” she said. “We’re so glad you could be with us for the summer.”

He blinked.

Her parents must have told her to say that.

There was no way she had thought of such a statement on her own.

Still, she had gotten his name right. She appeared to know who he was. And that was rather impressive for such a young girl.

But what was he going to do with a whole summer in her company? His parents were asking too much, expecting him to spend every summer with her. It was bad enough that he would someday be forced to marry her. Couldn’t he at least have these few years to himself before that day arrived?

He had done his duty. He had spoken to Lady Grace, as his mother had ordered. Now he addressed the Duke. “If you don’t mind, Your Grace,” he said, “I’m a bit exhausted from the journey. Perhaps I’ll skip tea, and take a nap instead.”

“Of course,” the Duke agreed. “Do you recall where your room is?”

“Is it the same room I stayed in the last time I was here?” He knew it would be. He had been given the same room every time he’d visited Leosted Manor. The one good thing about being a guest here was that he was the only member of his family who wasn’t required to share a

room. He knew that his sisters and his brothers enjoyed the vast suites they shared with one another, but Blaise wanted nothing more than a little privacy.

“I’m sure your things are already up there waiting for you,” the Duke said. “Will we see you for dinner?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” He might be able to get away with a nap right now, but his parents would never forgive him for missing the first dinner of the summer.

He made his way into the Manor and up the stairs that led to the familiar bedroom, wondering what Percy might be doing right now. Something exciting, no doubt.

And meanwhile, Blaise was stuck here with no one for company but his siblings and Lady Grace.

It was going to be a very long summer.

Chapter 1

“Grace, put that book down now and come with me. Your father has made a hire.”

Grace marked her place carefully in her book and set it on the table beside her, then rose to her feet. She had recently passed her twenty-first birthday, so she had known that this day was coming up quickly. Still, she couldn't help feeling a bit nervous. The person she was about to meet would, if all went well, be with her for a long time.

“Have you met her, Mrs. Stone?” she asked anxiously.

The housekeeper smiled. “I haven't, but I trust your father's judgment. He hasn't made a bad hire since I've been in his service. Just look at how long most of the staff have been with us here at Leosted Manor.”

That was true. Most of the staff had been in place longer than Grace could remember. His father's employees were very loyal to him, and to the family, and he repaid their loyalty in kind. Grace couldn't remember the last time there had been a new hire.

But now that she was of age, she was in need of a lady's maid. In fact, the filling of that position had already been put off for several years too long, because Grace had been so attached to her childhood governess. But this year her governess had been ready to resign her post, and everyone had agreed that it was time for a change.

Grace and Mrs. Stone made their way into the sitting room. Her father sat opposite a plain-faced, simply dressed young woman.

“Grace,” her father said as she entered the room, “This is Veronica Hughes. Miss Hughes, my daughter, Lady Grace.”

“My Lady,” Veronica said, rising smoothly to her feet and sinking into a curtsy. “I look forward to serving you.”

“Is this your first position, Veronica?” Grace asked. She was surprised at how youthful the woman looked—likely only a few years older than Grace herself.

“Yes, My Lady,” Veronica said.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll do very well,” Grace assured her, wanting to make her feel at ease.

“Thank you, My Lady,” Veronica said.

“You will report to Mrs. Stone, Veronica,” Grace’s father said. “She will show you to your quarters and help you to get settled in. Your duties will officially begin tomorrow.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Veronica said. “I thank you again.” She curtsied once more and left the room, Mrs. Stone following behind her.

“Thank you, Father,” Grace said. “She seems like a wonderful choice. I’m sure everything will go well.” She smiled at him and turned to leave, thinking to return to the book she had been reading. She had been at a particularly engaging part of the story.

“Hold on a moment, Grace,” her father said, holding up a hand.

She waited.

“Sit down,” he said. “We need to discuss something, just the two of us.”

“What is it, Father?” she asked, taking a seat. “Are you well?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “But I do worry about you, Grace.”

“About me?” She frowned. “But what’s to worry about?”

“You’re a young lady now,” he said. “It’s getting to be time you were married.”

Grace’s stomach dropped. In her heart, she had known this moment would come, but she had pretended to herself that perhaps it wouldn’t, that maybe her father had put it from his mind.

“Father,” she said, choosing her words very carefully. “If you’re talking about the arrangement you made with Lord Kirklow...”

“Lord Kirklow has died,” her father said.

She was stunned. “What?”

“I received notice of his death just a few days ago,” her father said. “His eldest son has assumed his title.”

“Blaise?”

“Lord Kirklow, now,” her father said. “The new Lord Kirklow.”

“And does he...” She shook her head, trying to understand what she was thinking. “Has he said that he’s ready to marry?”

“I haven’t heard from him directly,” her father said. “But now that he has come into his title, his mother and I have agreed that it’s time.”

The surprises just kept on coming. “You’ve been in contact with her? I thought you hadn’t spoken to her in years.”

“It’s true that we’ve been out of touch,” her father acknowledged. “I’m sure you recall the last summer they spent here with us.”

“I don’t know how I could forget it,” Grace murmured.

It had been the summer of her seventeenth year. As usual, their parents had spent the summer contriving situations that would force Grace and Blaise into one another’s company. And, as usual, both Grace and Blaise had done their best to avoid those situations.

To Grace it had become a sort of game at that point. She had tested herself to see how long she could hide in her room or in the library without someone coming to find her. She had escaped into the romance novels she loved to read, fantasizing about handsome gentlemen who would sweep her into their arms and make her feel loved and cared for.

If only I could have been engaged to that sort of gentleman, and not to him.

Blaise had avoided *her* that summer by sneaking away from his parents and into town. She had no idea what he did there, nor did she want to know. She was sure it had been the kind of thing she would want no part of.

Strangely, though she and Blaise had always despised one another, it was their parents who had brought the matter to a head. Blaise had announced at breakfast one day that he would be spending the day in town, as he so often did, and her father had erupted.

“You’re never around,” he had raged. “You’re meant to marry my daughter, and God only knows what you’re getting up to in town.”

Blaise’s father, the Marquess, had responded with equal fury. “Are you accusing my son of improper conduct?” he had demanded. “If you are, you had better say what you mean and be clear about it.”

“He ignores my daughter,” Grace’s father had said. “I assumed his behavior toward her would improve as he matured, but now I despair of him *ever* maturing!”

“Well, perhaps things would be better between them if your daughter wasn’t so standoffish,” the Marquess had said. “She never says a word to anyone, and she goes out of her way to leave a room that has anyone else in it. Her nose is always stuck in a book!”

The argument had continued to build until the two men were on their feet, shouting at one another in a most undignified fashion. At length, the Marquess had gathered up his family and marched out to the carriage house. Grace had retreated to her room and watched from the window as their carriage had pulled away down the cobblestone drive, and had wondered whether she would ever see any of them again after a fight like that.

Four years had passed since that time, and there had been no word of Blaise and no word of Grace’s engagement. She had begun to allow herself to believe that it might be canceled, though she had not dared to ask.

But now it seemed that she had been wrong. Her father was still set on her marrying him. And if he was to be believed, the Dowager Marchioness felt the same way.

Her father spoke again, jolting her from her reverie. “I heard from Lady Kirklow just a few days ago, as I said,” he told her. “She informed me that her husband had died, and she told me that she thought it was time you and her son tried to reconcile.”

“And you support that?” Grace asked incredulously. “You were so angry with him when last we saw him, Father. I thought you despised him.”

“And so I did, at the time,” her father admitted.

“Then how can you possibly want me to marry him?” Grace asked. “How can you want to see me married to someone you hate so much?”

“I remember what it was like to be a young man,” her father said. “I remember how easy it was to make impulsive decisions, to do things without thinking through the ramifications they might have or effects on other people. I don’t want to hold this young gentleman responsible for the rest of his life for things he did in his youth.”

She felt desperate. “Is there nothing I can do to persuade you?” she asked. “You know how much I dislike him, Father. I always have. Truly, I want nothing to do with him.”

“Grace, you must understand that it’s high time you were married,”

her father said. "You don't want to wait too long and reach an age at which you're no longer appealing to a gentleman."

"I'm not saying I don't wish to marry," she protested. "I'm happy to marry." Though years had gone by, she still daydreamed about finding a romance like those she read about in her books. "It's *him* I object to. Not the idea of marriage."

"We would insult Lord Kirklow by ending your engagement," her father said. "The entire purpose of this arrangement was to bring our families together."

"Father, I can't marry him," she said. "I just can't. I hate him. He hates *me*. The idea of spending my life in his company, of going to live in his house—I can't bear it. Please don't make me."

She was throwing herself upon his mercy, and she knew it. Her father had always been very generous and kind to her. She was his only child, and he doted upon her. Grace knew that was partly due to the fact that her mother had died when Grace had been a baby. Her father felt the need to provide the affection of two parents.

But there were some things a father could never understand, and at such times, Grace felt the lack of her mother. A mother would have understood her reluctance to marry a man she despised, her wish to wait for a man she could actually admire.

Her father merely shook his head. "I'm sure that you will learn to respect and appreciate your husband-to-be in time," he said. "He may not be your cup of tea, Grace, but after all, he is not a cruel man."

"He's never been particularly kind to *me*," Grace grumbled. She knew her father had a point, of course—there were many men in the world worse than Lord Kirklow. But was a lack of actual cruelty the most she could hope for in a husband?

Don't I deserve to have a husband like the gentlemen I read about in books?

It seemed the answer was no. Her future seemed to stretch out before her like a road from which she had no hope of deviating. Her father clearly had no intention of letting her change her course.

There was nothing she could do.

"Will we be returning to Leosted Manor for the summer, then?" she asked resignedly. "Or will they be coming here?"

"Neither," her father said.

Grace frowned. "Neither? I don't understand. You said that we were to reconcile. How are we to do that if we don't get together again?"

Surely he doesn't mean for me to marry Lord Kirklow without even spending any time getting to know him again first?

What if the first day they saw each other was their wedding day?

"You misunderstand me," her father said. "I do think it's important that you see each other again. But I also think it's best that we don't wait for summer. After all, it's still several months away, and we don't want to waste time."

"Then what are we going to do?" Grace asked.

"Lord Kirklow and his family will be traveling here and staying with us for the Christmas holiday," her father said. "You will be married at the start of the new year."

Chapter 2

Blaise drained his drink and set the cup down on the table. “I probably ought to get back home,” he said reluctantly.

“Oh, come on,” his friend Percy laughed lightly. “Stay for one more drink. You don’t need to hurry back so quickly, surely?”

Blaise glanced out at the gathering snow. He knew his mother would be growing worried about his absence. Ever since the unfortunate death of his father, she had been much more protective of her children than she ever had in the past.

And Blaise could understand that. Her grief was terrible, he knew. She had lost her husband. He was saddened by the loss of his father, of course, but his mother had been left alone in the world. Her five children were grown and would soon be leaving her as well. Of course she wanted them home with her as much as was possible.

“I’m afraid I can’t do it,” he told Percy. “Not tonight.”

“Will you at least be out again tomorrow night?” Percy asked.

Blaise smiled. “Of course I will,” he said. “You know I couldn’t possibly spend an evening pent up in Kirklow Manor with nothing fun to do at all. With only my brothers and sisters for company.” Though he liked his brothers and sisters, they were no match for Percy when it came to having a good time.

“Wonderful,” Percy said. “I thought we might try the new gentlemen’s club. You know, the one around the corner from here.”

“Is it open?” Blaise asked. “I hadn’t realized.”

“I believe they just opened to customers this week,” Percy said. “I’ve had an eye on it, of course. We don’t want to be the last ones to visit, do we?”

“Of course not,” Blaise said. If there was to be a popular new club or pub in town, he and Percy would want to be some of the very first

among its clientele. They would want to familiarize themselves with the place, make their judgments, and move on by the time it was discovered by the rest of the *ton*.

"I'll be there," he assured his friend, rising to his feet. "We'll meet here tomorrow at eight o'clock, if that's agreeable to you, and walk over together."

"Perfect," Percy said. "Get home safely in that snow."

Blaise nodded. Fortunately, he didn't have far to go. Kirklow Manor was right on the edge of town, an easy walking distance from the pub. In the spring or summer, it would have been a pleasant journey.

The snow did make it a bit more troublesome. He pulled his coat tight around his body as he walked, but he couldn't prevent some of the gathered snow from leaking into his boots. By the time he'd arrived back at the Manor, his feet were wet and he was shivering.

He walked into the Manor and was greeted by a flurry of activity.

Servants were rushing around, their arms full of linens. All the doors, including the door that led to the servants' wing of the Manor, stood open. From somewhere unseen, Blaise could hear his mother's voice, barking orders.

He reached out and caught his sister Cleo's arm as she hurried past. "What's going on?" he asked her. "Are we being robbed?"

"Nothing like that," she said. "We're packing."

He frowned. "Packing? What do you mean?"

"Mother says we're going to spend the Christmas holiday at Leosted Manor," she said.

His jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

"That's what she says," Cleo said. "I'm as surprised as you are. I never thought we would go there again. The fight between Father and the Duke was pretty bad, wasn't it?"

"It was terrible." Cleo would have been only five-and-ten years old at the time, so he wasn't surprised that she doubted the accuracy of her memory of the situation. "I've never seen Father as angry as he was that day. Do you remember the carriage ride home? He spent the whole time berating the Duke and saying that he would never spend another day in the man's company." He shook his head. "Why on earth are we going back?"

“You’d have to ask Mother,” Cleo said. “She hasn’t told us anything, apart from the fact that we should all pack our things and be ready to leave in the morning.” She started away. “I should get back to it.”

“Cleo,” Blaise said.

She turned back toward him.

“Does this have something to do with Lady Grace?”

Cleo shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “But... that seems like a safe guess to me.”

Blaise swore under his breath and set off in the direction of his mother’s voice.

He found her on the second floor, standing outside of Reginald’s bedroom and calling orders to him.

“*One* trunk, Reginald,” she said. “You’re not going to need two. We’ll only be there for a month, for goodness’ sake!”

“Mother?” Blaise said.

She turned to face him. “Blaise, thank goodness you’re home,” she said. “I’d feared you would be out all night with that friend of yours.”

He didn’t know why she disliked Percy so much—he never had—but now was not the time for that same old tired argument. “Mother, what’s going on here?” he asked. “Cleo says we’re going to Leosted Manor for Christmas. Is that true?”

“Yes, it’s true,” his mother said. “So you had better get to your room and start packing. We leave first thing in the morning.”

Blaise shook his head. “There is no way I’m going,” he said. “You can’t possibly expect me to do that.”

She turned slowly to face him.

Blaise couldn’t help taking a step backward. His mother could be a fearsome woman when her mind was set. Even now, at the age of nine-and-twenty, he was hesitant to cross her.

“The decision is made,” she said firmly. “I have already written to the Duke of Leosted, and I’ve had a letter from him in reply. We’re expected tomorrow evening. The whole family. That includes you, Blaise.”

“But why are we going back there, after all these years?” he asked. “I thought we had cut ties with the Duke for good. I thought we would

never have to see them again.”

His mother shook her head. “I don’t know what made you think that,” she said.

“You don’t know what made me think that?” He was incredulous. “What about the fact that it’s now been four years since we saw or had word from them? What was I supposed to think?”

“Your father was angry,” his mother said. “And understandably so. But you are still engaged to marry Lady Grace. That arrangement hasn’t gone away just because there was an argument.”

Blaise’s heart sank. He had known, from the moment Cleo had mentioned Leosted Manor, what this must be about. But he hadn’t wanted to believe it.

They had spent the past four years saying nothing of Blaise’s engagement. He hadn’t mentioned it, not wanting to remind his mother of the subject—he had hoped that it would simply never come up again. And though he hadn’t been able to help noticing that she never brought up the matter of him marrying anyone at all, he *had* seen quite a few young ladies in town that he admired. More than once, he had considered beginning to court someone.

But he hadn’t done it. Every time he had been on the verge of courtship and marriage, something had held him back. It would occur to him that marriage would take away from the time he could be spending exploring the town and having fun with Percy, and he would convince himself that it would be fine to wait one more year.

Marriage was disagreeable enough on its own. But *Lady Grace*...

She was so dull. Always stuck in her books, never wanting to experience anything of life. When he imagined being married, he imagined a young lady who was vivacious and pretty, who liked to laugh and enjoy herself. Not a stick-in-the-mud like Lady Grace.

“Mother,” he said. “This is not a good idea. Lady Grace and I are not a good match. We’ve never gotten along. You know that as well as anybody.”

“I know it all too well,” she agreed. “But you’re both adults now, and it’s time you got past the petty disagreements of childhood.”

“Petty?” Blaise could hardly believe what he was hearing. “Mother, it wasn’t *me* who got into such a dramatic fight that the whole family had to leave Leosted Manor in the middle of the night. It was Father. What would he say if he knew you were taking us back there now? He

would not approve.”

His mother’s face darkened, and Blaise knew immediately that he had made a mistake, that he had gone too far.

“Don’t presume to tell me how your father would feel,” she said. “It was he who arranged for your marriage in the first place. And I flatter myself I knew a bit more about his intentions and aspirations than you did, Blaise.”

Blaise was ashamed. He didn’t agree with his mother’s decision to take them to Leosted Manor, but he knew he shouldn’t have tried to use his father’s opinions against her like that.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” he said.

“Just go to your room,” his mother said. “We don’t have time to argue about it. Pack what you’ll need for the month of December. When you’ve finished, check on your brothers and see whether they need any assistance. I’ve got to go and help Cleo with her things.”

She hurried away, leaving Blaise alone with his thoughts.

There was nothing to be done but to comply. He trudged off to his room, feeling despondent.

So much for this holiday season.

All the plans he had made with Percy, all the parties they’d hoped to attend—none of it would be possible once he was stuck at Leosted Manor.

And this was just the beginning. He would be expected, on this visit, to finalize marriage arrangements with Lady Grace. There would be no getting out of it this time.

He shut himself in his room. Someone, no doubt one of the footmen, had gotten out his trunk and placed it in the middle of the room. It was already half-packed for him, but whoever had begun the work had left half the space available for Blaise to pack the items of his choice.

As if it matters what I wear when I’m in Lady Grace’s company!

Blaise was someone who took pleasure in selecting the perfect clothing for every occasion. He took pride in his appearance. But he was sure Lady Grace wouldn’t take any notice of what he looked like. Why should she? She never had before.

Besides, what do I care for impressing her?

He went to his wardrobe, pulled out an armload of garments at random, and began to fold them and place them in the trunk.

Maybe if I dress poorly enough, he thought idly, Lady Grace will tell her father to send me away.

But he wasn't holding out much hope for that outcome. If Lady Grace had planned to send him away, to insist that their arrangement be terminated, she would have done so long ago. It seemed to Blaise that she just didn't care one way or the other. She had no interest in him at all. He might as well not exist.

Well, at least that would change once they were married. She wouldn't be able to ignore him when he was her husband.

At least, he hoped she wouldn't.

He closed his trunk, sat down on top of it, and put his head in his hands.

He had actually dared to believe that this arrangement was over. He should have known better.

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About the Author

Hanna Hamilton has been fascinated with the regency era ever since she was a young teen, first discovering historical romance novels by famous authors such as Jane Austen and Lisa Kleypas. She believes that love was just so much more magical back then, more like a fairy tale. She always daydreamed about finding love herself that way, but since that is impossible in the twenty first century, she decided to write about it instead!

Born in Texas, Hanna Hamilton obtained a degree in Creative Writing, and had worked as a literature teacher before becoming a novelist. When she isn't writing, Hanna likes to explore the countryside with her husband and two children, gaining inspiration from the natural world around her.

So, come on a journey into love, confusion, and redemption all within the regency era. Hanna hopes that you will enjoy immersing yourself into her novels, and that you too will find a love for old fashioned romance, just as she has.

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